

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher
Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup
Senior Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

Friday, October 22, 2004

A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 23, 2000

A GOOD WORD FOR NEGATIVE TALK

**Mark L. Melcher
Stephen R. Soukup**

Last week, in a piece entitled "Europe 101," I said the following about John McCain's campaign in South Carolina. "I'm no campaign expert, but I think McCain goofed when he pulled his 'negative' ads. Like it or not, they work." Not surprisingly, my interpretation of McCain's loss last Saturday in South Carolina is that he goofed when he pulled his negative ads. Like them or not, they work.

In actuality, while McCain did pull his openly negative attacks on "W's" character, it is important to understand that he didn't forego negativism. What he did was play the ultimate negative trump card. He abandoned all other attacks on "W's" character except "the one big one;" the one that states: "I am so morally and ethically superior to you, you hateful lowlife, that I won't call you names, even though you call me names." Unfortunately for McCain, neither "W" nor the South Carolina public fell for the gambit, and the rest is history, as they say.

In the process of this anti-negative, negative ploy, McCain raised an issue that has haunted American politics for the past several decades, namely whether "negative campaigning" is good or bad.

This issue is relatively new. Name calling has, of course, been a fact of life in American politics since its founding. But, so far as I can tell, it wasn't until the early 1960s, when Hubert Humphrey lost to Richard Nixon, that Democrats began to grumble about "negative campaigning," a complaint that accelerated with the devastating, wide-margin defeats in subsequent races by McGovern, Carter (the second time around), Mondale, and Dukakis, who blamed their losses not on the public revulsion of their extreme liberalism, but on the fact that the Republicans called attention to it. Unfair, they cried!

Today, building on this short tradition, the vilification of negative campaigning is so strong among the Washington elite, that it is has finally infected Republicans.

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
The Political Forum

8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,
or visit us at www.thepoliticalforum.com

I think this is a travesty. In fact, I would go further and say that if ever there were a silly, moronic, idiotic, stupid, dumb, base idea in American politics, it is the assertion that negative campaigning is bad. Frankly, I believe mud slinging in politics is not just good, but great. It is, indeed, I think, indispensable to the process of choosing a leader.

Short of putting a politician into combat, I can't think of a better way of finding out "what a person is made of," as the saying goes, than plopping him or her down into the middle of a highly personal and intense political mud fight.

Do they fight back? Do they cower? Do they cry? Do they lose their temper? Do they fight clean? Do they fight dirty? How do they react to a set back? Are they magnanimous? Are they bitter? In my opinion, the answers to these questions reveal a great deal about how an individual will conduct him or herself on the international and domestic political battlefields, where, in both places, mudslinging is a fact of life.

Who are these people who want to be Commander in Chief of the most powerful military force the world has ever known? Who are these people who want to direct the most powerful economy the world has ever known? Are we really supposed to judge them exclusively on the poll-driven details of their "tax plan," their "plan to save Social Security," or their most recent "foreign policy speech?"

If history teaches us anything about leadership, it is, I believe, that when the going gets tough, it is character and grit that matters. A good mud fight won't tell who has the most of either, but it will tell more than a debate over a bunch of "ideas" drafted by campaign aids with the help of polls and focus groups. About the only thing important that "nice, nice" debates over "issues" reveals, I believe, is who is bankrolling the various candidates.

In fact, I think a case could be made that the absence of highly personal, nasty political fights would allow candidates far too much opportunity to create a fictitious character profile for themselves out of whole cloth; to create their own myths, so to speak.

I don't know whether this is the case with McCain, but it seems to me that those politicians who fret the most about doing away with "negative ads" are the one who are most afraid that the public myths they have created about themselves will be shattered by the process of a good old fashioned, political dust up.

I think the rule should be "anything goes," especially during a time like today, when corruption and sleaze in the administrative branch is, in my opinion, at, if not over, the historic high water mark. Almost ten years ago, in an April 4, 1990 article entitled "Today's Politicians Stink, There, I Said It And I'm Glad," I put this thought this way.

Politics is at its best in the United States when it is raucous, energetic, imaginative and biting; and as Harry Truman used to say, "if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Indeed, the slings and arrows index should increase, not be artificially decreased, during times . . . when political ethics are at a cyclical high.

I also pointed out in that piece that political name calling is an old and rich tradition in America. The following are some examples I offered to support this claim.

John Adams once called Alexander Hamilton the "bastard brat of a Scotch peddler." Andrew Jackson's supporters charged that when Adams' son, John Quincy Adams, was in Russia he sold a lovely American girl to the Czar and kept a bevy of concubines for his own use. Franklin Pierce's supporters described his opponent, General Winfield Scott, as a "carbuncle-faced old drunkard," while Scott's people produced a miniature book, an inch high and a half inch wide, titled *The Military Services of General Pierce*.

Perhaps the greatest of American presidents, Abraham Lincoln, was called at various times, an ape, a baboon, a buffoon, a clown, a usurper, a traitor, a tyrant, a monster, an idiot, a eunuch, a bigot, a demagogue, a lunatic, a despot, a blunderer, a charlatan, and a bully. More recently, Harry Truman called Richard Nixon a "shifty-eyed, goddamn liar."

So what, pray tell, would be so wrong with Bill Bradley pointing out that Al is chummy with some of the nation's most corrupt union leaders? What is wrong with Bradley telling people Al lied about his fund raising trip to the Buddhist temple? What's wrong with Al saying that the cost assumptions underlying Bill's health care plan are phony?

Does McCain lose it when he gets angry? Wouldn't that be important to know? Sling some mud and find out, I say. Better now than later. Finally, has there ever been a front running candidate for president whose personality is more of a mystery than "W's?" Who is this guy anyway? I frankly don't see what would be wrong with jerking him around and finding out a little more about him.

And what if a candidate is, in fact, a crook, a liar, a cheat, a thief, a coward, a draft dodger, an adulterer, a perjurer, a rapist, a licentious cad, or all of the above? Does McCain think it would be wrong for the opponent of such a candidate to call attention to these, shall we call them, affections, and publicly question whether they might be detrimental to governing?

If McCain believes this, I think he's a fool. In fact, I believe that one of the lowest points in Republican politics in the past decade was when Bob Dole's peculiar running mate, Jack Kemp, announced that he believed it would be "beneath" both him and Dole to question Bill Clinton's ethics and morals. I said the following at the time, in a piece entitled, "Character? Wherefore Art Thou?"

I think there is considerable evidence that the United States is in the midst of the single most corrupt period in its history. If American democracy is to survive this period intact, I believe Americans will need to better understand the dire threat that corruption presents to their way of life. For this reason, I think it is incumbent on the nation's political leaders to be on the alert for corruption and to scream bloody murder when they see it manifested.

Thus, I was particularly upset by Jack Kemp's assertion last week in the debate with Al Gore that he too apparently thinks that character is not particularly important. Kemp

sanctimoniously maintained that he believes it would be "beneath" both him and Bob Dole "to go after anyone personally;" thus implying that anyone who does so is himself or herself most probably, unlike Kemp himself, a person of diminished character.

I'm sure this made Kemp feel like he was a real swell guy. And I'm sure it made a lot of Democrats like him. But I think it's hogwash. I think it's nuts. Personally, I want no part of a party that is led by people who believe that the only important political issue is which side can deliver the most material goods.

Don't get me wrong. I believe that management of the economy is an extremely important part of Washington's role today, and therefore a very important part of the political equation. And I think the Dole-Kemp tax cut is a terrific idea. But to maintain, as Kemp did last week, that the moral and ethical behavior of the president is irrelevant, and that the question of who has the best economic plan is the only important issue in the election is not only nonsense, but dangerous nonsense.

In my opinion, Kemp should be using his position to impress upon the American public that there is a reason, a good reason, that the constitution contains guarantees against such transgressions as obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and invasions of privacy. He should stress that there is a reason why tens of thousands of Americans have died, and others have made great sacrifices, in order to insure these guarantees. He should feel comfortable challenging, and challenging enthusiastically, the character and integrity of any and all candidates for high public office; and he should expect to have his own honesty and integrity challenged as well.

As regular readers know, I have long believed that the American people are pretty stupid, and growing "stupider" every day. This judgment was reinforced earlier this week with the release of a new study which found that a majority of college seniors, from the nation's 100 most elite universities, could not, among other things, identify Valley Forge, words from the Gettysburg Address, or even basic principles of the U.S. Constitution.

Yet John McCain wants people like these, and many who are much dumber, to decide who should lead the nation on the basis of panel discussions over who has the best tax policy, the best plan for reforming campaign finance laws, and the best plan for "saving Social Security?" I think this is either dumb, duplicitous, or both. In fact, I doubt that a half a dozen Americans in a hundred have even a rudimentary understanding of any of these issues, or the skills to learn about them.

Whenever I make a statement like this, I am besieged with protests. The best ones, in my opinion, point out that, stupid or not, the American people have a reasonably good track record for choosing their leaders, "so put that in your elitist pipe and smoke it."

To these I respond, "You may be right." But then I point out that this track record, of which they are so proud, didn't result from an understanding and analysis of "the issues." It stemmed from the common sense judgment of the American people about "character." And, I would add, once again, that the clues and cues they need for making this judgment are best displayed in the midst

of a darn good political mud fight, not in a dry debate over whose "tax proposal" represents the best economic policy.

In fact, I would argue that the "stupider" the American people become, the easier it is to influence them with slick political advertising and myth making, and therefore the more important it becomes to have good old-fashioned, highly personal political fights to introduce a little honesty and spontaneity into the picture.

The most worrisome thing, in my opinion, is that the ability of the American people to judge character, as traditionally defined, may be dropping as rapidly as their proficiency in such standard disciplines as history, literature, economics, sociology, philosophy, and ethics.

If the American people have indeed exercised good character judgment in the past, when selecting leaders, it is because, in my opinion, they have grown up in a culture that has, until recently, been seeped in respect and reverence for the traditional virtues, whether they be Plato's classical virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance and a sense of justice; the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity; or the Victorian virtues of work, thrift, cleanliness, self reliance, perseverance, and honesty.

That these traditional virtues are under a full frontal attack by the elite, liberal establishment in America is no secret. Should this effort succeed, it would seem highly likely to me that the American public's alleged excellent track record of choosing good leaders would be threatened.

On a more positive note, I should say that I don't really think there is a chance that negative campaigning will cease, whether John McCain likes it or not. You can be sure that Al Gore will come out slinging mud with both hands after the Democratic convention. And you can be equally certain, I believe, that "W" will be slinging back. And I will applaud.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

Copyright 2004. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved. Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.