

Obama's Next Move

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I've been hesitant to talk about political strategy this season. Partly because it's so cliched (everyone's doing it), partly because it's so ephemeral, partly because it's just boring. But I think the situation Obama's found himself in has larger resonances and coming up with a solution to it is genuinely difficult.

For those who haven't been following things, the story is this. There are two candidates: Barack Obama, a young centrist Democrat who bills himself as the post-partisan candidate of "change" (i.e. not Bush), and John McCain, a fairly non-ideological 72-year-old Republican who has decided to give up on his centrist inclinations and run far to the right. For the first half of the campaign, Obama's message has been that he's change while McCain is more of the same (visual: McCain hugging Bush). McCain has argued that he's got experience and courage while Obama is not ready to lead.

This was exactly the campaign Obama had planned on and their strategy was working perfectly; McCain was behind just about the whole time. So McCain decided to shake things up and picked Sarah Palin, an unknown, far-right woman to be VP and began campaigning on them being "the original mavericks". (McCain's lack of ideology led the press to call him a maverick for signing onto some liberal bills; Palin won her seat through a primary challenge against corrupt Alaska Republicans.) Palin is wildly inexperienced (and so is being kept from the press) and most of her claims to be anti-corruption are complete lies, but the press has been half-hearted in pointing this out.

So that's the recap. Now the problem. Whenever they're stuck, conservatives have two traditional responses: swift-boating and projection. Swift-boating is taking your opponent's main asset and making it a liability. The classic example is taking John Kerry's venerated war service and arguing that it was a fraud. But it can be used more generally as well. So when someone says "We need to increase welfare to help the poor," the conservatives reply "Welfare doesn't help the poor — it just encourages them to be lazier." Projection is take your opponent's main asset and claiming it to be your own. The classic example here is that when the media is doing an effective job of parroting your story, you get out in front and complain that it spends its time parroting your *opponent's* story. The projection response to welfare is "No, we're the ones who really want to help the poor — that's why we're proposing an ownership society."

It's tough to swift-boat Obama on the issue of change. He's young, he's black, he's a Democrat. Calling him more of the same just seems laughable. But, because of McCain's history, saying that McCain is also for change has more resonance.

So what does Obama do? Whichever direction he goes, McCain will just follow him there. If Obama says he's for *real* change, McCain will just say he's for real change too. To voters, it'll seem like a toss-up. Worse, a lot of Obama's electoral strategy hinges on his massive on-the-ground team of volunteers bringing out new voters. If he goes negative (the obvious response), he'll take the campaign down into a mud-slinging match and turn all those new voters off. The only way to win is to go someplace McCain can't. And the one place McCain can't go is the issues. (Gasp! We might actually have to talk about issues.)

McCain's plans have been the most nutzoid right-wing proposals: end employer-paid health care, permanent bases in Iraq, tax cuts for the rich, and head-in-the-sand about energy. They're big juicy targets. But so far, Obama has been incompetent about going after them. Whenever his ads begin talking about issues, they suddenly switch into policy-wonk mode and begin using so many long words that even I don't understand what he's going on about. And when they criticize John McCain they just seem like they're making stuff up. To win, Obama's ads will have to make the issues sexy — he'll have to find a way to make talking about policy entertaining.

Crazy as that sounds, it isn't impossible. There's real substance to these policy disagreements — they're genuinely interesting. John McCain, for example, thinks the big problem with health care in America is that people have too much of it. Employers buy health care in bulk for all their workers, whether they need it or not. Instead, he thinks each American should pay for health care on their own. That's crazy, but it's substantive crazy.

Instead of taking the campaign further into the mud, Obama will seem as if he's raising it back up to talk about the issues. Hell, the media might even feel the pressure and start talking about issues themselves. It's too late in the game for McCain to rewrite all his policy proposals, so he'll either have to try to defend them (a complete losing battle) or he'll have to keep slinging mud at someone who is trying to have a serious discussion. Either way, he looks bad.

I have no idea if the Obama campaign is going to do anything like this. But it's the only way I see out of their rut.