
Essay

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The Whining Strategy

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The difference between the presidential candidates is not, as Ralph Nader claims, between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. As the strategy of calculated whining has been adopted by both campaigns, the main difference is between Namby and Pamby.

When Al Gore, seeking G.O.P. specifics to denounce, went so far as to suggest it was "kind of put up or shut up time," George W. Bush put on a hurt look and went into whining mode. "That doesn't sound very presidential to me. ... We have to do something to change the tone of the discourse." He later added reverently that "politics doesn't have to be ugly and mean."

Then the Bush campaign dared to air a TV commercial suggesting that Gore's eager participation in illegal 1996 Asian fund-raising — in contrast to his current embrace of campaign

The best offense
is to
take offense.

finance reform — was evidence of a credibility problem. At this fairly gentle jab, Gore went into full frontal whine. He dispatched his running mate (slogan: "Gore-Lieberman in 5761") to intone "these new attack ads ... drag us back to the worst politics of the past."

In each party's Peace Room, the sign reads, "It's the mean-spiritedness, stupid." Skilled counter-whiners run to media mamas sobbing, "That big bully hit me, and he promised he wouldn't!"

"GOP Goes on Attack in New Ad," headlines the easily horrified Washington Post; "Bush Approves New Attack Ad Mocking Gore," tut-tuts The New York Times. Reporters on the campaign trail grill both candidates fiercely not so much for stories about sharp disagreement with the opponent as for telltale signs of the great no-no of negativity.

Bush pioneered the whining strategy in the primaries with his orchestrated offense-taking at John McCain for slamming evangelicals who were hinting the former captive was crazy; McCain then retreated into the rictus of a forced smile. But when Bush tried to repeat this don't-touch-Mr.-Nice-Guy tactic against an expected Gore onslaught, he ran into world-class, hand-over-the-heart counter-whining mournfully accusing him of "changing his tune about changing the tone."

As a result, Bush is being flayed for his criticism of the Gore record. When he draws a distinction between what Gore did as vice president with what he says now, that is described as "a personal attack on Gore for hypocrisy." Then comes the beauty part for Democrats: because Bush promised to change the tone and then dared to cast even lighthearted aspersions on Gore's mistakes and exaggerations, it is Bush who is attacked for his hypocrisy, mocked for his mockery, and pilloried endlessly for his unwillingness to move on.

What is the reason for the orchestrated adoption by both parties of the childish, nasalized peevishness? The whining manipulation is driven by the universal opinion of pollsters that most women voters are tender flowers who cannot bear any expression on a candidate's face other than earnest concern for their children. Nobody can stand the heat, say the focus groupies, so get out of the kitchen — just as all those women voters did.

Because negativity is the supreme no-no, politicians are persuaded that sunniness is next to godliness and outrage is outré. That's why Bush is told to point with pride but rarely to view with alarm. When Bush transgresses by criticizing the hollowed-out state of our national defense, he risks the withering whining of Gore about running down our brave men and women in uniform.

Thus has the declension of "all politics is local" gone from "all criticism is an attack" down to "all attacks are personal." In 2000, amiability is all. Gore has solemnly promised that he is "not going to say a single negative thing about my opponents," leaving it to his once-reMOVED surrogates to treat Texas as a state governed by a despot who starves its poor and fries its convicts.

Republicans, whose convention theme song seemed to be a Dewey-eyed "Sheep May Safely Graze," thought they could attract the don't-bicker crowd by constant choruses of "Mean to Me." They are coming to the Labor Day realization that Bush's technique of compassionate complaining is being neatly countered by Gore's systematic sniveling.

To besmear legitimate criticism with the phrase "personal attack" is a trick both campaigns play. Let's not fall for it. The country would lose if the winner turned out to be the loudest whiner. □