



The Power of the Internet and the Failure of Rovian Politics

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Age has finally become an issue for John McCain. But the problem isn't the candidate's 72 years; it's the antediluvian approach of his campaign.

McCain is running a textbook Rovian race: fear-based, smear-based, anything goes. But it isn't working. The glitch in the well-oiled machine? The Internet.

"We are witnessing the end of Rovian politics," Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google told me. And YouTube, which Google bought in 2006 for \$1.65 billion, is one of the causes of its demise.

Thanks to YouTube -- and blogging and instant fact-checking and viral emails -- it is getting harder and harder to get away with repeating brazen lies without paying a price, or to run under-the-radar smear campaigns without being exposed.

But the McCain campaign hasn't gotten the message, hence the blizzard of racist, alarmist, xenophobic, innuendo-laden accusations being splattered at Obama.

And it seems that the worse McCain is doing in the polls, the more his team is relying on the same gutter tactics. So over the next 15 days, look for the McCain campaign to become even uglier. That's what happens when following Rovian politics is your only strategy -- and Rovian politics isn't working.

McCain has stockpiled his campaign with Rove henchmen, including not one but three of the people responsible for the political mugging inflicted on him in 2000.

Just last week he brought on Warren Tompkins in an "unofficial" capacity to see how receptive North Carolina would be to some Rovian slime. After all, it's right next door to South Carolina, where in 2000 Tompkins and his buddies in the Bush campaign spread race-baiting rumors about McCain having an illegitimate black daughter (referring to McCain's adopted Bangladeshi daughter Bridget).

And those disgraceful robo-calls that McCain is running? They were done with the help of Jeff Larson and his firm FLS-Connect -- the same firm that created the robo-calls smearing McCain in 2000.

At the time, McCain's reaction to the attacks on him was: "I believe that there is a special place in hell for people like these."

His reaction now? I have a special place in my campaign for people like these!

So the Karl Rove specials keep coming. Obama and Ayers. Obama the Socialist. Obama and ACORN "destroying the fabric of democracy." Palin (herself the manifestation of Rovian decision-making) delineating which parts of "this great nation of ours" are "pro-American." (Interestingly, the sites of the 9/11 attacks didn't make the list.)

And, did you hear, Obama is also... black! And he wants to give your money to all the poor black people! McCain didn't come right out and say that, but it's surely what he insinuated in his radio address this weekend: "Barack Obama's tax plan would convert the IRS into a giant welfare agency." Somewhere, Karl Rove is smiling, Richard Nixon's southern strategy is waxing nostalgic, and John McCain's missing moral compass is getting steamed about John Lewis' evocation of the civil rights struggle.

But there is a diamond amidst all this dung: the lack of traction this Rovian politics is getting. It's as if Rove and his political arsonists keep lighting fires, only to see them doused by the powerful information spray the Internet has made possible.

The Internet has enabled the public to get to know candidates in a much fuller and more intimate way than in the old days (i.e. four years ago), when voters got to know them largely through 30-second campaign ads and quick sound bites chosen by TV news producers.

Compare that to the way over 6 million viewers (on YouTube alone) were able to watch the entirety of Obama's 37-minute speech on race -- or the thousands of other videos posted by the campaign and its supporters.

Back in the Dark Ages of 2004, when YouTube (and HuffPost, for that matter) didn't exist, a campaign could tell a brazen lie, and the media might call them on it. But if they kept repeating the lie again and again and again, the media would eventually let it go (see the Swiftboating of John Kerry). Traditional media like moving on to the next shiny thing. But bloggers love revisiting a story. So when Palin kept repeating her bridge to nowhere lie, bloggers kept calling her on it. Andrew Sullivan, for one, has made a cottage industry of calling Palin on her lies. And eventually, the truth filtered up and cost McCain credibility with his true base: journalists.

The Internet may make it easier to disseminate character smears, but it also makes it much less likely that these smears will stick.

As a result, the McCain campaign's insinuation-laden "Who is Barack Obama?" was rendered more comical than spooky. Who is Barack Obama? The guy we've been watching over and over and over during the last two years. We've seen him. We know him. And we can remind ourselves about him with a quick Google search and a mouse click.

Obama "has shown the same untroubled self-confidence day after day," and "over the past two years, Obama has clearly worn well with voters." Those are the words of David Brooks, who has gotten to know Obama just like the rest of us.

Four years ago, McCain's Rovian race-based appeals to our darker demons might have worked. This year, they are blowing up in McCain's face. And in the face of the entire GOP.

Colin Powell's endorsement of Obama as "a transformational figure" was powerful. But even more powerful was his withering indictment of the state of the Republican Party and the cancer of Rovian politics.

It was similar to the diagnosis of Christopher Buckley following his endorsement of Obama: "To paraphrase a real conservative, Ronald Reagan, I haven't left the Republican Party. It left me."

There are many other anti-Rove Republicans abandoning their party. I've had several Republican friends tell me privately what Powell and Buckley told the world publicly: that they're voting for Obama. Most of them not because they like Obama, but because they can't stand what Bush, Rove and now McCain and Palin have done to their party.

Rovian politics may or may not end up destroying the GOP. But, thanks to the Internet, with a bit of luck it will no longer have the power to befoul our democracy.

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