Out of bounds

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

All may be fair in love and war, but not in politics. Presidential campaigns not only help us choose the leader of our country. They also help define who we are and what kind of country we want to be. So it is vitally important that, as much as possible, these campaigns be conducted on a high moral plane.

To put it mildly, that hasn't always been true in American political history. As the man said, politics ain't beanbag. There are many examples of campaign commercials and dirty tricks that, while successful in achieving some short-term political objective, have done long-term damage to our civic life.

One of the most infamous is the so-called "daisy girl" commercial from the Lyndon Johnson campaign, which helped scare away voters from Barry Goldwater in 1964 by persuading them that he should not have his finger on the nuclear button. Or consider the Willie Horton ad, which helped dash the hopes of Michael Dukakis in 1988. Or think about the whisper campaign and "push polls" that helped sink John McCain in South Carolina in the 2000 GOP primary.

Or consider two shameful examples from the 2008 presidential contest. Yes, 2008. There are lessons we never learn.

First, push polls are back. Those are the annoying calls from pseudo pollsters who interrupt your dinner hour, pretending to get your opinions about a candidate when all they're really trying to do is disseminate negative information about the candidate. These hit pieces are largely unregulated. Anything goes - even, it seems, fostering suspicion of a candidate based on his religion. Just ask Mitt Romney, who is currently getting slimed by this tactic in Iowa and New Hampshire with push polls that ask voters how they would feel about electing a Mormon president or what they think about the fact that Romney spent the Vietnam War in France on a mission for the Mormon church.

The Romney campaign has blasted the tactic, and so have a number of media commentators. As well they should. There is no place in politics for these kinds of vicious and cynical ploys. Campaigns should be about facts and not fear, especially since fear doesn't listen to facts.

That also goes for a desperate television ad from the quixotic Tom Tancredo campaign that is way over the top. The spot tries to link illegal immigration with the war on terror by insisting that one reason to control the border is to prevent future terrorist attacks, when we all know that the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackers entered the United States legally and that they certainly didn't come across the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Tancredo campaign ad, while inflammatory and irresponsible, is no surprise coming from a man who

has stoked nativist fears in the immigration debate and suggested we ought to bomb the holy Muslim city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. But it's not good for our political discourse, or the country as a whole. And it's another reason that no one seems to take the Tancredo campaign as seriously it takes itself.

Even in the rough and tumble of politics, there are those tactics that are so shameful they go out of bounds. And when that happens, we must say so.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune â€“ CNS.

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