Behaving badly

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

There is nothing wrong with running a good but tough presidential campaign. But there is something wrong with running an unfair and unseemly campaign. As they say, politics ain't beanbag. But it doesn't have to turn into a food fight. Americans have the right to expect that those who run for president will abide by certain standards. The office carries enormous dignity, and so the pursuit of it should also be dignified. Those who forget that fact risk going down in history books alongside Lyndon Johnson's "Daisy Girl" commercial or the infamous Willie Horton ad that helped elect George H.W. Bush in 1988.

Now you can add one more example to that dubious list: The double-teaming of Sen. Barack Obama by Sen. Hillary Clinton and former President Bill Clinton. There is something awfully distasteful about a former president morphing into a political attack dog. Even more so when the individual in question embraces his new role in ways that are cynical, hypocritical and underhanded.

Cynical because the Clintons have managed to play the race card against Obama and then make it seem as if he was the one dealing. Hypocritical because it boggles the mind that Bill Clinton - aka "America's first black president" and someone who actively cultivated support from black voters - could complain that black voters in South Carolina would support someone because of his race. And underhanded because so much of what both Clintons are saying about Obama are distortions or outright lies.

Much of the media saw through this and, in recent days, there has been a lot of criticism of the Clintons for their "anything goes" approach to this race. This isn't news to those of us who have long been skeptical of this couple and their tactics. But it may have come as a shock to African-Americans and other elements of the Clinton coalition who now support Obama.

It's one reason why people are beginning to wonder if Bill Clinton isn't, by word and deed, doing substantial harm to his wife's candidacy and damaging his own legacy. It might even be a good idea for the ex-president to assume a lower profile in this campaign.

One has to wonder if it isn't already too late and if the Clintons haven't already crossed some line and lost the support of the same people they will need in November, should Hillary Clinton become the Democratic nominee. In fact, Obama has begun telling audiences that, while he is confident he can bring the Democratic Party together if he is the nominee, he is not sure Hillary Clinton can do the same if she wins the nomination.

We'll leave that to the Democrats to sort out. But one thing that the Clintons already have had working in their favor is the notoriously short memory of the American people. Folks age. Time passes. People forget. Even the juiciest soap operas fade from memory.

But thanks to recent events, and the way the Clintons have behaved, it's all coming back.

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