Ugly allegations distract from vital issues

by The Indianapolis Star

The United States is fighting a war on two fronts. Terrorists threaten the nation's security. The economy may be headed into recession, if it's not there already. Health care and energy costs continue to surge. The list of issues that should command Americans' attention, from taxes to illegal immigration, goes on. But what has dominated news media coverage of the presidential race this week?

The Clinton campaign's charge that Barack Obama plagiarized another politician's speech. Questions about whether Obama's wife is proud of America. And whether John McCain, who is scheduled to appear at a town hall meeting today in Indianapolis, had a "romantic" relationship with a lobbyist eight years ago.

The accusation against McCain arose Wednesday night after The New York Times released a story that can best be described as strange. Strange because it wasn't really about McCain's relationship, romantic or otherwise, with a lobbyist named Vicki Iseman. Here's the key sentence in The Times' story, one that outlines the theme of the report: "Even as he has vowed to hold himself to the highest ethical standards, his confidence in his own integrity has sometimes seemed to blind him to potentially embarrassing conflicts of interest."

Let's break down that sentence. The candidate has promised to hold himself to high ethical standards. He's confident in his integrity. But sometimes he's blind to potentially embarrassing conflicts of interests. Underline the words "potentially embarrassing." Not clearly immoral, unethical or illegal. But potentially embarrassing.

That's not exactly Watergate material.

But The Times' story dominated the news cycle Thursday not because of "potentially embarrassing conflicts of interest" but the loaded word "romantic." The TV talking heads panted hot and heavy over whether McCain had indulged in an affair eight years ago. For the record, both McCain and the lobbyist, Iseman, deny the accusation.

Bob Bennett, McCain's attorney, also strongly denies the main thrust of The Times' story, citing about a dozen instances when the senator voted against the interests of Iseman's clients. For America's sake, please tell us that this week does not signal the start of nine months of shaky allegations and mudslinging. Voters deserve, and this nation needs, a higher level of debate.

McCain and Clinton or Obama will provide Americans with a clear choice on critical issues. Stay in Iraq or pull out quickly? Raise taxes or hold them in check? Create a federal health-care system or continue the free-market approach?

Let's focus on those issues. Let's settle who is best suited to lead this nation forward based on leadership, ideas and vision. Let's not be distracted by political hit jobs, unfounded rumors or journalism that promotes sensationalism over substance.

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