

In the gutter

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Will Rogers may have been on to something when he said, "I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a Democrat."

Not just disorganized, it's getting ugly. In fact, with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton still battling it out for the Democratic nomination for president, you could call it the political version of March Madness.

Once this primary season is over and Democrats have chosen their nominee, one wonders if they'll have anything left to throw at Republican John McCain because, at the moment, they're throwing everything at each other.

That includes unflattering biblical references, questions about patriotism and, most recently, references to a certain infamous blue dress.

After New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a former appointee to key positions in the Bill Clinton Cabinet, endorsed Obama last week, Democratic strategist James Carville, a Clintonite, angrily likened Richardson to Judas for what Carville considered an act of betrayal. Asked to respond, Richardson said on "Fox News Sunday" that he wouldn't "get in the gutter like that" except to say that Carville's comments were "typical of many of the people around Sen. Clinton (who)... think they have a sense of entitlement to the presidency."

One person who, as we know, has no trouble getting into the gutter is Bill Clinton, who appears to be back to his old ways of bashing Obama in ugly and divisive ways. Whereas once the line of attack seemed to be that Obama's appeal was limited to African-Americans, now Clinton is raising questions about just how good an American Obama really is.

Last week, the former president was speaking to veterans in North Carolina. One minute, he was playing up a match-up between Hillary Clinton and John McCain, and brushing aside Obama. The next, he was saying how it "would be a great thing if we had an election year where you had two people who loved this country and were devoted to the interest of this country... instead of all this other stuff that always seems to intrude itself on our politics."

Gordon Fischer, a former chair of the Iowa Democratic Party and part of Obama's Iowa support team, responded by going nuclear. Fischer used his own blog to complain about Clinton's tactics, calling them "a stain on his legacy, much worse, much deeper, than the one on Monica's blue dress." Fischer apologized for the remark.

Stop the madness. Much of this rhetoric is overheated and irresponsible. It adds nothing to the debate, and it only feeds the sideshow dimension to the campaign. It also makes it that much more difficult if not all but impossible for whomever emerges as the nominee - and right now, it would seem that the numbers are on Obama's side - to put the Democratic coalition back together. Worse, this brand of ugliness poisons our political dialogue and hurts the country in the long run by teaching our young that campaigns have become just another brutal and uncivilized contest.

Leadership requires many different attributes - courage, strength, wisdom, vision, among others. But it starts with maturity. And as of late, Democrats haven't exhibited much of that.

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