

On the high road

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Hillary Clinton wasted no time revving up her attack machine after her disappointing showing in this week's Democratic presidential primaries. The New York senator herself made the baldly racial claim that her rival, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, couldn't win in the general election because less educated whites didn't like him. Meanwhile, aide Paul Begala said in a race against the certain Republican nominee, Arizona Sen. John McCain, Obama's support would be limited to "eggheads and African-Americans."

We are going to find out if these assertions are true. Obama's strong win in North Carolina and narrow loss in Indiana has made his nomination all but inevitable. Whether or not the Clintonites want to believe it, the fall race is almost certainly set.

So we appear to be in for the novel prospect of a presidential campaign between two candidates who vow to take the high road - and seem to really mean it. Obama's entire campaign is built on a rejection of the ultrapartisan politics of the past 15 years. Despite rival Hillary Clinton's tough tactics, he didn't bring up such vulnerabilities as the fact her brothers essentially sold pardons to criminals in the closing days of her husband's presidency.

As for McCain, he appears to see personal attacks as an affront to his notion of military honor. This was reflected in his sharp criticism of a local North Carolina GOP TV ad going after Obama for worshipping under extremist Chicago Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr.

This is highly encouraging. Too many past campaigns have ended up dwelling on fringe issues - issues that can be framed and exploited in 30-second commercials but which have little to do with the most important policy matters of the day. A serious presidential campaign is long overdue.

So we hope Obama and McCain have a sustained, thoughtful debate over the interrelated issues of trade, protectionism and public anxiety in an irreversible era of economic globalization. We hope they do the same on foreign policy, with each offering a clear vision of what America's role in the world should be. We hope they also engage the campaign's most neglected issue: how the federal government should deal with the crushing cost of Medicare and Social Security in coming decades as our society grows much older.

The attack ads will still be omnipresent, of course, thanks to political action committees with their own agendas. So we can expect from one side to hear Obama described as a Manchurian candidate devoted to bringing Wright-style militancy to the White House, while the other side will assault McCain's reputation as a maverick by noting his role in the Keating Five scandal and making dark insinuations about his wife's family ties. It's all too predictable.

But if Obama and McCain keep the focus on substance and don't echo the attacks, we just might end up with a truly thoughtful and illuminating presidential campaign. In other words, something far more edifying than what we saw in the 2004 campaign - or in the Obama-Clinton nomination fight.

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

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