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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

## THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

### McCain's DIRTY POLITICS ATTACK - HOW DEMOCRATS CAN RESPOND

BY JAMES VEGA

As veterans of George Bush and Karl Rove's dirty politics gang have assumed top positions in the McCain campaign, his attacks on Barack Obama have rapidly degenerated into a replay of the dishonest "swift boat" smears against John Kerry.

This TDS Strategy Memo suggests how Democrats can fight back.

- Part one analyzes "John McCain's 'Karl Rove style' attacks on Obama and how Democrats can respond."
- Part two considers "How to attack John McCain — What Rove Would Do"

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## **KARL ROVE'S STRATEGY FOR ATTACKING OBAMA — HOW DEMOCRATS CAN RESPOND**

With the recent appointment of Steven Schmidt and several other staffers to the highest levels of the McCain campaign, the political protégés of Karl Rove have now taken almost complete control. As a result Rove's basic political strategy has been elevated to the core approach of the campaign.

At its heart, Karl Rove's approach for the last 20 years has been an essentially class-based attack on Democrats — one that portrays them as representing an out-of-touch, educated elite who have little in common with average Americans. In this strategy, individual Democrats are not simply wrong about specific issues; their errors all arise from deep, pathological defects in their basic values and character.

This general strategy can be traced back to the campaigns of Richard Nixon and George Wallace in 1968 and 1972. But one of Rove's distinct additions was to recognize that attacks on a candidate's character must be psychologically plausible — they must be fine-tuned to exploit weaknesses the opposing candidate actually appears to reflect in his behavior.

In this regard, Rove has always had an exceptionally sinister aptitude (one that is reminiscent of Hannibal Lector's perverse but penetrating form of psychological insight) for being able to recognize subtle human weaknesses and frailties. For example, although Al Gore and John Kerry were both products of relatively advantaged, prep school environments and were clearly not working class "ordinary guys", they were nonetheless quite distinct. On the one hand Gore was vulnerable to being portrayed as somewhat pompous, self-important and egotistic. Kerry, in contrast, invited the caricature of being a long-winded, detached, emotionally remote New England Yankee. The overall class-based frame worked for both men, but the political hit-man's art lay in recognizing and exploiting the subtle variations between them.

Obama presents an even more complex challenge. Although meditative, professorial, articulate and elegant, he nonetheless does not fit the image of a typical left-wing college professor (or, for that matter, of a Black militant, a well-to-do New York limousine liberal or corrupt Chicago pol).

The solution the Rove team developed, only days after taking control of the McCain campaign, was to portray Obama as a resident of the rarified world of the "Hollywood movie star liberals" — a pampered universe of exclusive health and exercise clubs, expensive hotel suites and fancy bottled water. The implication was that, like other Hollywood stars, Obama must be "self-infatuated and effete" or "vain and out of touch" or "effete, elite and equivocal" — in short, a weak and vain man without real character; a male fashion model living a movie stars' life and not the real life of ordinary Americans.

This class-based caricature of Obama is important for the McCain campaign because it provides a critical psychological, character-based foundation to support a very disparate set of accusations — that he does not really care about America's soldiers, that he lacks real

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patriotism, that he “plays the race card” and so on. Using this “typical Hollywood liberal” stereotype, it is not even necessary to explicitly contrast Obama with the “heartland virtues” of John McCain who the Rove team directly links with such traditional movie-hero figures as John Wayne.

How can Obama best respond to this line of attack? The kernel of truth which the attack exploits is the fact that Obama is most obviously not an “ordinary” or “average” guy in any meaningful way and any attempt on his part to present himself as such necessarily appears completely unconvincing and condescending.

But it is a profound misunderstanding of “ordinary people” to think that they require a candidate to exactly resemble them in order for him or her to win their respect and support. On the contrary, individuals who excel and achieve success through hard work, perseverance and dedication are greatly admired by most Americans, so long as they continue to genuinely respect and care about ordinary voters if they enter political life. Average voters genuinely admire upward mobility and success if it is honestly and honorably achieved.

And in fact, Obama’s life story provides a powerful core narrative that supports precisely this alternative way of understanding him. It is composed of three elements:

1. A far from easy or pampered early life and a youth marked by confusion, mistakes, bad choices and lack of direction.
2. A remarkable personal turn-around, build on the foundation of the incredibly hard work, perseverance and dedication that is required to get a law degree at a top university.
3. A decision to turn his back on the “easy life” of a professor or private attorney and to try instead to find a role of service to the community.

This is simply not the life story of a typical pampered Hollywood star or vacuous celebrity. On the contrary, it is a quintessentially American success story of youthful error followed by redemption and success through hard work and an ultimate decision to seek a way to contribute to society.

The McCain campaign’s attempt to fit Obama into the “vacuous Hollywood star” framework simply will not stick if Obama’s unique biography can be correctly presented. Between now and the convention, Democrats must make a coordinated and concerted effort to define a simple core narrative along these lines — one that can be driven home every single time the McCain campaign attempts to stigmatize Obama with their utterly fraudulent depiction of his character.

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## HOW TO ATTACK JOHN MCCAIN—WHAT WOULD ROVE DO?

As the McCain campaign has rolled out its new, “Karl Rove style” personal attack on Barack Obama, Democrats have begun to feel a very familiar sense of frustration.

On the one hand, for many Democrats the “high road” taken by the Barack Obama campaign in replying to the attacks until several days ago did not seem adequately aggressive. At the same time, the DNC and other third party Democratic attacks on McCain’s close financial ties to oil companies and other lobbyists and his subservience to the policies of the Bush administration seem somehow to be glancing blows that do less damage to his personal image than do his attacks on Obama.

There is a reason for this. One fundamental element of the Karl Rove approach is to focus the most visceral and aggressive attacks on the opposing candidate’s character and personality rather than his policies. The recent Democratic attacks on McCain criticize, sometimes very bitterly, his positions and actions, but the Republican attacks on Obama are directly aimed at impugning his character.

In the past, Democrats often felt that focusing one’s attacks on an opposing candidate’s character was inappropriate — that politics should be about issues and policies, not personalities. But repeated muggings by the Rove Republicans have made many, if not most, Democrats now quite willing to respond to personal attacks in whatever way seems required.

The more difficult problem is that McCain is not, at first glance, an easy target for attacks on his character. His youthful military experience as a pilot and POW and his well-cultivated media reputation as an occasional “maverick” in the 80’s and 90’s present no obvious vulnerabilities. Current characterizations of him as old, ill-tempered, easily flustered and prone to blundering, while certainly true, are also essentially trivial. Comparing McCain to “The Simpsons’” Mr. Burns or to a clichéd grouchy grandpa simply has no meaningful political effect.

But, in fact, McCain is actually profoundly vulnerable to a powerful, aggressive and damaging attack on his character. McCain’s actions in recent weeks have provided compelling evidence for three genuinely disturbing propositions about his character, core values and integrity.

1. That John McCain has become desperate to win this election and is willing to sacrifice his deepest principles and his personal honor in order to do it
2. That the John McCain we see today is only a pale, diminished shadow of the man he once was in his early years.
3. That John McCain is allowing men he once despised and held in complete contempt to manipulate him and tell him what to do – to literally put words in his mouth and tell him what to say.

At first glance these statements are so strong that they sound almost defamatory. But each is supported by McCain’s recent actions (as described below) and they fit together into a single coherent narrative of ambition overcoming integrity and moral character.

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Here is how this narrative can be presented in the format of a typical TV spot format

“Character”

John McCain says this election is about character — and he’s right.

In the 2000 presidential race the Bush campaign — led by Karl Rove — viciously attacked John McCain’s wife and child — they said his wife was a drug addict and that the child he and his wife adopted from an orphanage was actually his illegitimate Black daughter. On election night, his wife was in tears.

Back then, McCain was disgusted. He said there was “a special place in hell” for rumormongers like these people. He made a promise to his family and to his supporters that he would never run a dirty campaign like that. Never.

But early this year John McCain hired Charlie Condon, the very same man who was behind those vicious smears to run his South Carolina campaign. And then several weeks ago he brought Steven Schmidt — leading protégé of Karl Rove and master of the political hit job — on board to be his campaign manager and write the talking points for the new negative campaign against Barak Obama.

It’s sad to watch, McCain’s willingness to humiliate himself by hiring the same gang of people who horribly insulted him and his family. It shows that he has become so desperate to win this election that he is willing to sacrifice his principles and his personal honor in order to do it

Let’s face it. A real man would have said to those people — “Get the hell out of my office before I throw you out” the minute they walked in. A person would not have to be a tough guy like John Wayne to say that. A gentle, decent man of character would have told them the same thing.

But what did John McCain say about Bush’s dirty politics gang?

He said: “I had to get over it... it was a long time ago”

It’s sad, genuinely sad

John McCain — he’s no longer the man he used to be.

This is an extremely harsh and bitter judgment of John McCain character — so much so that it would obviously not be appropriate for the official Obama campaign to embrace it — but it is important to note that it is not a dishonest smear. It is a psychologically and morally reasonable judgment of McCain’s character based directly on his decision to surrender his

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career and political destiny to men whose behavior and values he once considered revolting and intolerable.

For this precise reason, this judgment will resonate with many ordinary voters. They will have the following very simple, common sense reaction — “I’d sure as hell never hire and take orders from the same people who viciously slandered my wife and my children. I may not be a famous politician or a big shot, but I have more character and personal integrity than that”

This basic narrative and approach can be presented in a wide variety of ways and through a large variety of media. Below, for example, is a more satiric and ironic way of raising these issues, one that could be designed for and circulated via YouTube or similar internet channels.

“McPuppet”

*Camera focuses on puppet that looks like John McCain with strings rising above him. The puppet says:*

“I’m John McCain and I approved this ad”

*Camera pulls back to reveal larger puppet manipulating the McCain puppet. It says:*

“I’m Steven Schmidt, McCain’s new campaign strategist. I wrote that new negative ad

I was trained by Karl Rove. He gave me the nickname “the bullet”

*Camera pulls back once again to reveal an even larger puppet that looks like Karl Rove which is pulling the Schmidt puppets’ strings. It says:*

“I’m Karl Rove and I wrote the political game plan that Steve Schmidt is using this year — it’s the same plan I have used for every Democrat for the last 20 years. Gore, Kerry, Obama, the candidate changes but the plan is always the same. Just call them weaklings and cowards. Go negative, early and hard”

Narrator:

McCain said he was different — but let’s face it, he’s got the same old gang pulling his strings.

Is he McCain or McPuppet... Look at the people running his campaign, and then make up your own mind.