

Cynical and Divisive Chutzpah

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You have to give the Republicans credit-if nothing else for sheer chutzpah, albeit a cynical and divisive kind of chutzpah. Facing a tough election campaign with an uninspired base and an uninspiring candidate, John McCain made an extraordinary vice-presidential choice and then rallied the Republican Party to shift their message from experience and character to a nasty campaign that seeks to frame the election, yet again, as being a battle between Americans against elitists.

We cannot really be surprised that the news that Governor Palin's daughter was pregnant dominated the news stories on Tuesday. However, it is surprising that this piece of news was probably the best thing that could have happened to the Republicans and to Governor Palin. It has succeeded in shifting the coverage of Palin to issues such as her family, which are completely irrelevant, and away from issues such as her bizarre political history and extremist political views. More important issues such as the party's failure over the last eight years and their wrong-headed solutions for the future dropped out of the public view entirely and have not yet returned.

As many have pointed out, Palin's family situation should be off limits in this election if for no other reason than there is absolutely no percentage in the Democrats bringing it up. However, the Republicans have succeeded in turning this issue to their advantage and making it a central positive in their campaign. For this reason, it probably will not go away. Perhaps ironically, if Sarah Palin were a third term governor of Alaska, with three teenage children who were doing well in school and not pregnant, who had led several international trade delegations for Alaska and been more of a political presence in Washington in the last few years, she would be a weaker candidate. It is precisely her lack of experience, seeming unfamiliarity with important issues and, yes, her family life that make her an asset to John McCain.

Sarah Palin, in the last few days, has been more than a distraction. The media revelations about everything from her lack of experience, not having even had a passport until 2007, term as mayor of a town that has fewer people than many apartment complexes in my neighborhood, family and strange political associations, which have dominated the news in recent days have pushed out other, more important negative stories about John McCain.

We have not heard anything recently about McCain's difficulty keeping the facts straight on foreign policy, his failure to understand or propose solutions for the country's economic ills, his many houses or the lobbyists running his campaign. In short, through nominating Sarah Palin, the campaign has traded one set of negatives for another set of less serious, or relevant, negatives.

But that is not the only reason why Palin's inexperience and interesting family life make her a far stronger candidate. It allows the Republican campaign to shift to familiar, if patently

disingenuous, grounds, that of the Republicans being the party of real Americans and the Democrats being the party of elite, out of touch Americans. The Sarah Palin being presented now, pregnant daughter and all, is the best way the McCain campaign could have moved the election in this direction. The notion that voters should support Sarah Palin because she is just like so many of us not only reinforces the image of the Republican Party as the party that understands and represents regular Americans, but also highlights the otherness of the Obamas, which many Americans will feel and will be encouraged to feel more in the upcoming weeks-and I am not just talking about race here.

The tone of the recently, and mercifully, completed Republican convention was to almost dare not just Democrats, but the media to criticize Sarah Palin. It was clear that any criticism of Sarah Palin would be interpreted by the Republican campaign as prima facie evidence of elitism. This extends not just to comments about her family life, where elitism is at play at times, but to her political positions, record and experience as well. It is yet to be seen if this will work, but it is certainly a courageous and frightening strategy.

McCain more than doubled up his bet when he chose his running mate, but he also seemed to psychologically free himself of any lingering obligation to be the decent and serious. He is now free to, as George Wallace would say, keep his message so low even the goats, or perhaps in this case, endangered polar bears, can get it.