

Why Is the Republican Party Still Trying to Define President Obama?

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Lincoln Mitchell

Harriman Institute, Columbia University

In politics, as in many things, timing is extremely important. Barack Obama, for example understood that despite, or perhaps because of, concerns about his lack of experience in Washington, 2008 represented a unique opportunity for him to pursue his presidential aspirations. Similarly the Swift Boating of John Kerry in 2004 was effective because it occurred early enough in the campaign that it helped the Republicans define the Democratic nominee.

This rather obvious point appears to be lost on the Republican Party as the general election approaches. The news last week that wealthy Republican backer Joe Ricketts was contributing to an anti-Obama super PAC that, among other things, was considering revisiting the Jeremiah Wright story, demonstrates that the Republican campaign efforts are still struggling with issues of timing. The news that the Jeremiah Wright story was possibly going to be used against Obama was met by concerned responses from the Obama camp, including the news that former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel was very angry about it. The question of why Rahm Emanuel being angry qualifies as news notwithstanding, it is likely that this response was not heartfelt, but a campaign tactic.

Within a few days of this story breaking, Ricketts backed away from this and indicated he will likely not use the Jeremiah Wright angle. This was a wise decision as the Jeremiah Wright story is unlikely to move a lot of voters this year. It might have had a bigger impact than it did in 2008, and Republicans who believe that candidate John McCain should have gone after Obama harder on this issue may be right, but the attack will have significantly less impact this time around. The potency of the Jeremiah Wright issue was that it could have been used in 2008 to define candidate Obama to an electorate that did not know much about him. That opportunity no longer exists. While the Jeremiah Wright story may be potent rhetoric for strident anti-Obama voters who want to see the president as a radical African-American who hates America, it will have little impact on most voters, including, importantly, most swing voters.

Because he has been president for almost four years, Obama is now well known by almost all Americans. Accordingly, it will be extremely difficult to redefine him during this election, particularly if the effort to redefine him is based on what is, by now, old news. Reelection campaigns are usually determined by evaluations of the incumbent, as well as the appeal of the challenger, not by reintroducing the incumbent president to the American people as Ricketts seems to want to do.

Ricketts will probably never run these ads and Jeremiah Wright might not reappear during the 2012 campaign, but this strategy is nonetheless a reminder of the power of the radical anti-Obama faction within the Republican Party and their ability to damage Mitt Romney's chances

of defeating Obama. The Romney campaign team understands that to win this race they need to persuade swing voters that Obama has failed to help the economy recover, and more generally has done a poor job as president. This will be a difficult, but doable task as the economy continues to show some signs of recovery and many voters have long enough memories to remember both how bad the economy was when Obama became president and how little the Republican Party in congress has done to help the economy.

For Romney to make this argument successfully, it is important not just to remain focused on the economy but to avoid having the campaign sidetracked by those on the far right who have a different agenda than Romney and an understanding of politics and President Obama that is sufficiently frightening that it alienates many potential Romney supporters. It looks like Romney has managed to beat back Ricketts' attempt to steer the message in the wrong direction, but it is also likely that this will be an ongoing struggle for Romney and his campaign team.

There is a significant faction in the Republican Party that still appears to believe that Barack Obama would never have become president if the American people knew the "truth" about him. This is why issues like Obama's place of birth, alleged connections to radicals of various political stripes and plans to destroy America never quite go away. Those holding these views might be on the fringe of the Republican Party, but it is a big, and surprisingly influential fringe. Moreover, no major Republican official, least of all Romney, has stood up to this group within the Republican Party. Until Romney does that, he can expect characters like Ricketts with equally destructive ideas for how to go after President Obama to keep appearing during this campaign.