

McCain's Most Absurd Week Yet

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In the last week the McCain camp has run a strange ad attacking Obama for being a celebrity and linking him to the likes of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, accused Obama "playing the race card from the bottom of the deck," suggesting that Obama is both a racist and a cheater, because the Democratic nominee suggested, in rather innocent language, that the Republican Party might make try to scare voters away from voting for a Black man, and now run an even stranger advertisement that, as far as I can see, uses faux religious imagery to suggest that Obama believes himself to be some kind of religious figure or savior.

It is not clear where McCain is going with all this, or what his next move will be but what has become clear is that Obama has gotten under McCain's skin. This is not good news for the Republicans. The two McCain advertisements seem more aimed at getting Obama angry than at actually persuading voters to vote for McCain. The first is not only pointless, but, to say the least, beneath the office of the presidency. It is hard for McCain to position himself as a serious person with real ideas and solutions when his paid communication is not just negative, but immature and, frankly, bizarre. The second is even stranger suggesting that Obama sees himself as a messiah figure, to the nutty conspiracy oriented voter this sounds like an effort to portray Obama as some kind of a false prophet, but to the substantially larger, more rational segment of the electorate, this seems again, silly and immature, and not entirely inoffensive to the more than 200 million Christians in the US, many of whom take their religion somewhat seriously.

The almost surreal accusation that Obama is playing the race card has the feel of a campaign ploy that was made by a few campaign operatives who were sufficiently blinded by their anger at their opponent that they were no longer able to make thoughtful decisions. The question all of this raises about McCain's campaign is whether its aim is to get John McCain elected president or simply to get Barack Obama angry. Last week, it looked like the answer was the latter.

This is all a little strange given that, in many respects, this still looks like a close race. To be sure, by most measures, if the election were held today, Obama would win. He would not, however, win by the landslide that many are anticipating or, at least, for which they are hoping. McCain is not yet 20 points down, reduced to making high risk campaign strategies and trying to salve the wounds of defeat, but he is beginning to act that way.

One can imagine a scenario inside the McCain campaign where some of the more detached strategists are urging McCain not to waste money on attacking Obama on the tenuous grounds that he is a celebrity or to waste time suggesting that Obama is a racist. One can also imagine that these strategists are being shouted down, or at least overruled, by people closer to the candidate saying that McCain wants these ads and won't take no for an answer. I have no access to the inner workings of McCain's operation, so cannot prove this, but have been around enough

campaigns to recognize this dynamic when I see it. This may be no way to run a campaign, but it is undoubtedly a far worse, and more dangerous, way to run a presidency.

Discipline is essential in political campaigns. The extraordinary discipline of the Obama campaign has been one of the keys to its successes. McCain's campaign seems far weaker in this area. They have lost the discipline needed to stay focused on the still realistic goal of winning the presidency, choosing instead to make jabs against Obama that cannot seriously be expected to more than a very few voters. Unless McCain's campaign regains its focus and resists the temptation to use their campaign as a vehicle to settle scores with Obama and the media, McCain will almost certainly lose decisively in November.