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DIRTY POLITICS - SO WHAT ELSE IS NEW?

Nostalgia is like unto a huge rasp that smooths off the rough edges of the past and allows us only to remember how it should have been, rather than how it really was. The good old days are good chiefly because they are past. We want to believe that our grandfathers and grandmothers were more humane than our contemporaries. Everyone, we would like to believe, minded their own business and took care of their children, read the Bible daily, and went to church on Sunday.

According to today's journalists, it would have been unheard of for men who were running for public office to have attacked the character of their opponents. Most T.V. and newspaper commentators seem to have the idea that dirty politics is an innovation of the late 20th century. If the present presidential race had occurred in the 18th, 19th, or earlier 20th century, would the Republicans have mentioned Mr. Clinton's avoidance of the military draft or his possible unfaithfulness to his wife. Would Mr. Quayle's college record or his lack of a military record be an issue? The answer is a resounding yes.

For those who bemoan today's presidential campaign featuring bombastic lowjinks, character assassinations, and generally dirty pool, let them take some solace from White House races of the past.

Unfortunately, mud balls in presidential elections are

as American as cream pie in the face, or in the back, as it may be.

"Dirty politics have always been with us", says Gary Copeland, a professor in telecommunications at the University of Alabama. "Things aren't any different, they have just taken new form". It could also be mentioned that with today's electronic media they are much more accessible.

By way of proof, I have chosen some of the spicier examples of pure American presidential politics from past campaigns. Outright slander, half-truths, and dirty tricks have played side-by-side throughout the history of elections in this country. "A half-truth is like a half brick", writes Bruce Felkor, former executive director of the Fair Campaign Practices Committee. "You can throw them twice as far."

Even the "Father of our Country", who was the only president elected twice by unanimous vote, was not immune to the barbs of his detractors.

He is a "closet monarchist" and "His Mightiness affects royal tendencies by bowing a lot".

The fact was that Mr. Washington was 6'4", which was quite tall for his time, and seemed to bow a lot as he stooped to get through doorways.

When Washington ran for the Virginia House of Burgess in 1758, he saw to it that the 391 voters and their friends received 160 gallons of rum, beer, and cider on election day. This was called "swilling the planters with bumbo".

The swilling was still going on in 1792. "At an election in a certain state", reported the Gazette of the United States in November, "a bystander observing the particular situation of a great number of electors, who had been regaled at the expense of one of the candidates, remarked on the occasion, "that the voice of the people was the voice of grog".

By the time of the 1800 campaign between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, American politicians had fairly well developed the art of dirty politics. Sex and religion have always played well in political campaigns and the role of fundamental preachers has been to be out in front spreading the good news.

Thomas Jefferson was the target of some of the meanest attacks of the early 19th century. Federalists claimed that the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence was a deist champion of the people, a friend of the French Revolution, who acted with savage fury. Their favorite epithet was "Jacobin", that is - French radical. For a high-toned people, they waged an astonishingly low-level campaign. They charged that Jefferson had cheated his British creditors, obtained his property by fraud, robbed a widow of her estate worth tens of thousands of pounds, and behaved in a cowardly fashion as Governor of Virginia during the Revolution. "Jefferson", wrote one Federalist, "was a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow. The son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father, raised wholly on hoe-cake, made of

coarse-ground southern corn, bacon and hominy, with an occasional change to fricasseed frog".

Queried one Federalist leaflet, "Can serious and reflecting men look about them and doubt that if Jefferson is elected, and the Jacobins get into authority, that the morals which protect our lives from the knife of the assassin, which guard the chastity of our wives and daughters from seduction and violence, defend our property from plunder and devastation, and shield our religion from contempt and profanation, will not be trampled upon and exploded".

"With Jefferson as First Magistrate", warned the Connecticut Courant, "murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced. The air will be rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil will be soaked with blood and the nation black with crimes".

In 1800, as in 1796, Jefferson's religion was a primary target. Yale's congregationalist clergyman President, Timothy Dwight, had ahead set the tone. In a fiery sermon in 1798, he asked why good Americans tolerated such free-thinkers as Jefferson. "Is it", he thundered, "that we assume the same character and pursue the same conduct? Is it that our churches may become temples of reason - the Bible cast into a bonfire --- our wives and daughters, the victims of legal prostitution - soberly dishonored, speciously polluted; the outcasts of delicacy and virtue, and the loathing of God and man, our sons the disciples of

Voltaire and the dragoons of Marat?".

A writer in the Connecticut Courant summed up the case against Jefferson on September 29. "Look at your houses, your parents, your wives, and your daughters. Are you prepared to see your dwellings in flames? Hoary hairs bathed in blood, female chastity violated? Look at every leading Jacobin as a ravening wolf, preparing to enter your peaceful fold, and glut his deadly appetite on the vitals of your country. GREAT GOD OF COMPASSION AND JUSTICE, SHIELD MY COUNTRY FROM DESTRUCTION."

It was not quite all take and no give on the part of Republicans in 1800. Sex has never been far from the hustings. In 1800 John Adams' foes circulated the story that he had sent his running mate, Charles Pickney, off in a U. S. frigate to get two mistresses for each of them. Adams, with more humor than was usual for him, answered, "If this be true, then General Pickney has kept all four for himself and cheated me out of my two".

The Republican also spread the tale that Adams planned to marry one of his sons to one of George III's daughters, start an American dynasty, and reunite the United States with Britian.

It was during the 1804 campaign that the stories of Jefferson and his black female slave first arose. The Federalists claimed that the President had made Sally Hemings, an attractive Monticello slave, his concubine and had several children by her. Jefferson's friends denied

the last charge, but Jefferson himself remained silent on the theory that "the man who fears no truth has nothing to fear from lies". He did, though, indirectly deny the Hemings story in letters to friends and it seems likely that it was his nephews, Peter and Samuel Carr, who were really involved with Black Sally, as the Federalists called her.

Black Sally stories continued to haunt Jefferson well into his second term of office. As an expression of his disdain of the Embargo Act of 1807, fourteen-year-old William Cullen Bryant published a long poem in Boston entitled The Embargo, containing the following cracks.

And thou, the scorn of every patriot's name
Thy country's ruin and thy country's shame.
Go, wretch, resign they presidential chair
Disclose thy secret measures, foul or fair
Go scan, philosopher, thy Sally's charms
And sink supinely in her sable arms
But quit to abler hands, thy helm of State
Nor image ruin on thy country's fate.

Twenty-eight years after the John Adams/Thomas Jefferson campaign, John's son, J. Q., was involved in what historians refer to as the vilest of campaigns. Andrew Jackson was the target. Before Jackson's detractors were finished, they had compiled a long list of Old Hickory's sins: adultery, gambling, cock fighting, slave trading,

drunkenness, theft, lying, and murder.

Their most venomous attack had to do with six militiamen who had been sentenced, and executed, with Jackson's approval, for desertion during the Creek War in 1813. Philadelphia editor, John Binns, got out a "Coffin Handbill" about the incident. It portrayed the soldiers as innocent men who had completed their terms of service and merely wanted to go home, and insisted that Jackson had murdered them in cold blood. The Coffin Handbill, which received wide distribution, was enormously effective. Headed by the words, "Some accounts of the Bloody Deeds of General Jackson, it was singled out that one of the men, John Harris, was a preacher of the Gospel who had patriotically volunteered for service and then had been shot dead at Jackson's bequest when his tour of duty ended and he wanted to return home. Accompanying the Harris story was an eighteen stanza poem entitled, "Mournful Tragedy", lamenting Jackson's deeds.

Jackson chuckled at the outrageous claims in the Coffin Handbill, but he found nothing amusing in the attack on his family. He was reduced to tears when he came across the following statements printed in opposition newspapers.

"General Jackson's mother was a common prostitute brought to this country by British soldiers. She afterwards married a mulatto man with whom she had several children, of which number General Jackson is one."

He flew into a rage when he read the assaults on his

beloved wife, Rachel, in Adamsite papers and pamphlets. Jackson's marriage had long been a target of his enemies. He had wooed, won, and wed Rachel in 1791 after her first husband, Lewis Robards, had left her to get a divorce. Robards, it turned out, had delayed getting the divorce and then sued for divorce on the grounds that his wife was living in sin. As soon as the divorce came through, the Jackson's remarried, but malicious stories about Rachel's adultery dogged Jackson for the rest of his life. During the 1828 campaign, anti-Jackson newspapers revived the immorality charge and asked voters, "Ought a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband be placed in the highest office of this free, Christian country. When Rachel, whose health was poor, suddenly died in December, 1828, Jackson was convinced that Adamsite slander had done her in. "May God, Almighty forgive her murderers", he exclaimed at her funeral, "as I know she forgives them. I never can". He never forgave Adams or Clay for not enjoining their followers against bringing Rachel's name into the campaign.

One of the most popular songs of the 1828 campaign extolled the valor of Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. The Hunters of Kentucky, written several years before by Samuel Woodworth (author of The Old Oaken Bucket), was widely distributed by the Jacksonians. The song included the following stanza:

You heard, I suppose, of New Orleans
Tis famed for youth and beauty

There're girls of every hue, it seems
From snowy white to sooty
Now Parkenham had made his brags
If he that day was lucky
He'd have those girls and cotton bags
In spite of Old Kentucky.

But Jackson, he was wide awake
And was not scorned at trifles
For well he knew Kentucky's Boys
With their death dealing rifles.

He led them down to cypress swamp
The ground was low and mucky
There stood John Bull in mortal pomp
And here stood Old Kentucky.

Oh, Kentucky, the hunters of Kentucky
Oh, Kentucky, the hunters of Kentucky.

Suppose your candidate is a somewhat newcomer to politics with a squeaky-clean reputation, so clean that his first name is Honest. What do you go after?. He is as ugly as mud pie and speaks the language of the backwoods.

Abe Lincoln, fifty-one years old and a newcomer to national politics, excited no hates anywhere. He was a skillful debater and a self-made man. He appealed to plain people in the West. About the only things dirt-level politicians could smear were his lack of formal education

and his appearance.

Many newspapers in the North approved of the selection of Lincoln as the Republican candidate, but some papers were extremely hostile. Complained the Atlas and Argus in Albany, New York, "He is not known except as a slang-whanging stump speaker of which all parties are ashamed". The New York Herald was even more contemptuous. "The conduct of the Republican Party in this nomination is a remarkable indication of the small intellect, growing smaller. They pass over Seward, Chase, and Bates, who are statesmen and able men, and they take up a fourth-rate lecturer, who cannot speak good grammar, and who, to raise the wind, delivers his hackneyed, illiterate compositions at \$200 a piece. Our readers will recollect that this peripatetic politician visited New York two or three months ago on his financial tour, when in return for the most unmitigated trash, interlaced with coarse and clumsy jokes, he filled his empty pockets with dollars, coined out of Republic fanaticism. If, after he becomes president of the United States, the public finances should fail, he can set out lecturing through the country".

Southern newspapers were not as polite as the Herald in their appraisal of Mr. Lincoln. The Charleston Mercury - "A horrid-looking wretch he is, sooty and scoundery in aspect, a cross between the nutmeg dealer, the horse swapper, and the night man - a creature fit evidently for petty treason, small stratagems and all sorts of spoils.

He is a lank yankee of the uncomelist visage, and the dirtiest complexion. Faugh! After him, what decent white man would be president"? The Houston Telegraph also stressed his bad looks. "Lincoln is the leanest, lankest, most ungainly mass of legs and arms and hatchet face ever strung on a single frame. He has most unwarrantly abused the privilege, which all politicians have, of being ugly".

The Albany Atlas and Argos joked -- "A rough looking western hunter", the paper reported, "met Lincoln on the prairie and leveled his musket at him." "Hold there", cried Mr. Lincoln, "You don't mean to shoot me, do you?" "Yes sir", was the answer. " I pledged myself, if I ever saw a worse looking human than myself, I would shoot him." "Well" replied Lincoln, "If I look worse than you - fire away".

Coming to Lincoln's defense, Dick Yates, a good Republican, running for Governor of Illinois, told the voters at rallies, "Well, if all of the ugly men in the United States vote for Mr. Lincoln, he will surely be elected".

A New York Tribune editorial stated in defense of Lincoln, "Truth constrains us to say that Honest Abe is ~~not~~ a handsome man; but he is not as ill looking as has been represented. Handsome is as handsome does; however is the sensible adage.

The Douglas Democrats, of course, did not see it exactly that way. One of their most popular campaign

ballads went:

Tell us he is a second Webster
Or, if better, Henry Clay
That he's full of gentle humor
Placid as a summer's day.

Tell us again about the cordwood
Seven cords or more a day
How each night he seeks his closet
There, alone, to kneel and pray.

Tell us he resembles Jackson
Save he wears a larger boot
And is broader 'cross the shoulders
And taller by a foot.

Any lie you tell, we'll swallow
Swallow any kind of mixture
But, oh don't, we beg and pray you
Don't for land's sake, show his picture.

That which has been related thus far in this paper is only a sample of America's number one past time, "Dirty Politics". However, in order to finish within my allotted time, I claim the right to return in two years and lay the the last half of the 19th century and all of the 20th century on you.

I will close with a few of my favorite quotes from past political campaigns.

The young Tom Dewey entered the 1948 presidential race by throwing his diaper into the ring. After the same election, Groucho Marx declared, "The only way a Republican will get into the White House is to marry Margaret Truman".

William Jennings Bryan reminded Senator Joseph Foraker of the Platte River, "He is six inches deep and six miles wide at the mouth".

And, last of all, not a presidential campaign, but George Smathers, speaking to backwoods crackers in Florida regarding Senator Claude Pepper - "His sister was a thespian and his brother was a practicing homosapien who went to a northern liberal college where he matriculated".