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In Dick We Trust



By Marty Kaplan



JEFF T. GREEN VIA GETTY IMAGES

We already know how Republicans will run against Hillary Clinton, because Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus is busily banging that drum.

“Hillary Clinton is, quite frankly, someone the American people can’t trust,” he said on CBS’s *Face the Nation*. “This video proves why you can’t trust Hillary Clinton,” he wrote on his Facebook page. “We already know from recent polls that a majority of Americans do not believe she is honest or trustworthy,” he pointed out in “It’s a Matter of Trust,” an op-ed on the party website.

It’s a classic political tactic. A campaign for the White House must have a master negative narrative about its opponent. That narrative needs to be about character, not positions; presidential votes are driven by gut feelings, not issue arithmetic. The narrative also shouldn’t be made from whole cloth; it should reinforce a story that already has currency in polling and media coverage.

“You can’t trust Hillary Clinton” ticks those boxes. It’s an appeal to emotion, not an argument about policy. It builds on the “slick Willie” narrative about her husband, who said he had “no sexual relationship with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky,” which would have been technically true if only being fellated didn’t count as a having sexual relationship. “You can’t trust her” also builds on episodes in Secretary Clinton’s past, like the missing documents from her Arkansas law firm that mysteriously turned up in the White House family quarters, or the sniper fire she said she avoided at a Bosnian airport, an account that turned out to be “just a misstatement.”

The beauty of this tactic is that you can make any example that comes along fit into the master narrative. The Priebus video, for example, describes a shift in her position on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, from supportive in 2011 to wary in 2015, as a “flip-

flop.” Flip-flopping is a garden-variety accusation of pandering, but in the context of this dishonesty narrative, a change in position has been reframed as a lie.

That’s why her supporters are heartsick when she herself appears to feed the beast. Even if nothing she did with her emails turns out to be illegal or unprecedented, and even if contributions to the Clinton Foundation are no more or less quid pros than the dark money that Super PACs contribute anonymously to both sides of the aisle, the untrustworthiness narrative draws no distinctions between a common practice and a smoking gun, between an appearance of impropriety and a flagrant breach of trust, between an inflammatory allegation and a factual explanation. Republican message discipline, amplified by billions of dollars’ worth of paid ads, ensures that every day is Benghazi day.

But this can boomerang. Consider Jeb Bush’s bungled answer to Megyn Kelly’s question about George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq: “Knowing what we know now, would you have authorized the invasion?” (Set aside the strangeness of the question; if people could time travel, no one would ever make preventable mistakes.)

Here’s how Jeb Bush defended his brother’s war: “In retrospect, the intelligence ... was faulty.” This reveals the other master narrative that any campaign must deploy, a defensive story to defuse attacks — in this case, launched improbably by Fox News. “Faulty intelligence” belongs to a master narrative about forgivable fallibility. To err is human. In a messy and dangerous world the inherent difficulty of collecting and interpreting intelligence means that, inevitably, mistakes will be made.

That’s the exculpatory story that Jeb Bush and the rest of the Republican presidential field (except perhaps Rand Paul) must tell. But “faulty” is the wrong word. The right word is “fraudulent.” If the intelligence justifying the invasion was later found to be unsound, well, that’s unfortunate, but people aren’t perfect. But if the intelligence was manipulated, concocted, cherry-picked, distorted, falsified, rigged — if we were lied to — then it’s not a matter of knowing then what we know now. It’s a matter of what we were bamboozled into believing then. As Priebus would say, “it’s a matter of trust.”

So the Republicans risk being caught in a trap of their own devising. The master narrative they’re going with — dishonesty — is as dangerous for them as they want it to be for Hillary Clinton. They want the 2016 election to turn on the question “Can you trust her?” But Democrats can use jiu-jitsu and make the election turn on the question “Can you trust the people who duped you into Iraq?”

Republicans may cling to the “faulty intelligence” story, but each day brings new evidence of deceit. Michael Morrell, the former CIA deputy director and acting director who gave George W. Bush his daily intelligence briefings, has now acknowledged that Dick Cheney was lying when he told us in 2003 that Saddam Hussein “has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.” Cheney and the neocons (who’ve now set up shop in Jeb Bush’s inner circle) told us there was a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda, but Morrell told Chris Matthews that that’s “not what the intelligence community” concluded. From the Nigerien yellowcake and the uranium centrifuge tubes that didn’t exist to the torture that did (check out this infuriating new *Frontline* documentary), the factory for manufacturing the phony case for war was headquartered in the vice president’s office. Cheney, not W., is the real albatross around the neck of the Republican presidential field.

If untrustworthiness is the attack they themselves are most vulnerable to, why are the Republicans working so hard to sharpen that blade? “Projective identification” is the term psychoanalyst Melanie Klein used to describe how people can unconsciously split off a part of themselves and project it onto others instead. That might be what’s happening here. Reince Priebus looks at Hillary Clinton and sees a deceiver. Dude must not know he’s looking in the mirror.

This blog post is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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