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In Politics, Two Negatives Don't Make a Positive



By Marty Kaplan

A riddle: What piece of political wisdom is always wrong — but its opposite is also always wrong?

Okay, here's a hint: Willie Horton. Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. John Boehner.

The Boehner illustration was on full display last week. Ever since President Obama's first 100 days in office, when House minority leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) said his bills "make me want to throw up," Boehner has been attacking the president on every front from terrorism ("no plan to keep America safe") to health care ("Hell no, you can't!"). And for nearly two years, Obama has refused to dignify Boehner's charges with a response, instead using surrogates like Joe Biden to counter-punch.

A few weeks ago, Boehner gave a speech in Ohio demanding an extension of the Bush tax cuts for millionaires, calling on Obama to fire his entire economic team (not, by the way, a terrible idea), and asking Americans to elect a Republican Congress because "it's time to put grown-ups in charge." Someone in the White House must have finally decided that if Boehner's charges went unanswered, they would stick — just as Lee Atwater's smear of Michael Dukakis (he'll pardon black men so they can rape and kill white women) stuck, and just as the Swift Boaters' smear of John Kerry (the guy with a Purple Heart was actually a coward in Vietnam) stuck, when the objects of their slanders didn't deign to fight back.

That's why Obama went to Cleveland last week, where he nailed Boehner in a speech of his own, hanging around Boehner's neck the cynicism of the Republican strategy: rooting for Americans' pain. The GOP economic plan, Obama said, is nothing more than this: "If I fail, they win."

The response of the political class to Obama's speech was as predictable as the sunrise. Mark McKinnon, an advisor to George W. Bush, channeled conventional wisdom, saying, "I don't think most Americans have a clue who John Boehner is and wonder why the president is lowering himself to attacking a congressman."

The media response was also a jerked knee. As an NPR correspondent explained, "Many Americans may not have heard of Congressman John Boehner, but President Obama wants you to think of the House minority leader as the Democrats' arch nemesis... Mr. Obama mentioned Boehner by name eight times today, framing him as a sort of Republican boogeyman."

So the lesson here, for budding Washington sages, is that when you're attacked, you must not respond, because you'll only be elevating your opponent, giving him a platform and publicity. Except that when you're attacked, you really must respond, because otherwise the charges will stick. Except that when you respond, the story won't be about the substance; it'll be about your strategy of demonizing your opponent, an interpretation that somehow wasn't part of the storyline when your attacker went after you in the first place. And for good measure, when you do fight back, the narrative will be that you're "on the defensive," so your show of strength will be decoded as a sign of desperation.

Two winners emerge from this capital Catch-22.

One is the political-media class, which can never get it wrong. You will always be able to muse both that there is grave danger in not responding to an attack, and also that there is grave danger in responding to an attack. Whatever the mugged guy does, you've got a way to trash him.

The other winners are the attackers. A first strike is always a good move. The more negative your attack, the more incentive you'll give the media to amplify it, because producers know that there's nothing that grabs audiences like ugly. Plus the counter-attack, if it comes, will be framed as weakness; the one who punches second will be described as on the ropes.

The loser in all this is any political figure who believes that Americans truly are sick and tired of negative campaigning and bitter partisanship, which is what Americans always say, but which usually results in winning elections. Despite the Obama team's 2008 insistence that it had learned the lessons of the Swift Boating of John Kerry (remember fightthesmears.com?), polling suggests that the dismissive way they've handled the attacks of 2009 and 2010 - he's a, you know, terrorist-loving, granny-euthanizing, Kenyan-born Muslim Marxist - hasn't been particularly effective. The bipartisan kumbaya stuff hasn't worked, either, neither in Congress nor in the country. People may say they want Gandhi, but really they want Rocky.

Now, with a stalled recovery, high unemployment, and a train wreck of an election looming, the ol' fired-up-and-ready-to-go Obama is out on the partisan hustings. It'll be something of a miracle if the president's hammering will persuade enough Americans to prevent Boehner from becoming Speaker. Maybe Sunday's *New York Times* story, prompted by Obama's Ohio speech and laying bare Boehner's lobbyist ties, is the first dribble of a journalistic gusher; if Americans hear how Boehner was "caught handing out checks from tobacco lobbyists to fellow Republicans on the House floor" enough times, perhaps it'll sink in.

But it's not only a lousy economy that's muting Obama's message. He's also fighting the patented no-win double-bind narrative about negativity that passes for wisdom in Washington.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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