



Self-defeating myths Democrats must dispel

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As Democrats prepare to do battle with John McCain this fall, we need to dispel two comforting but self-defeating myths about recent failed White House campaigns.

These canards are also shared by many editorial page pontificators, who ascribe 1988 and 2004 losses to crafty Republicans working their negative-advertising black magic, Willie Hortonizing Michael Dukakis and swift-boating John F. Kerry, who were either excessively noble or maybe too slow or too wimpy to fight back.

Evil may have lurked in the souls of those GOP operatives, and Democratic consultants may have been constrained by nominees unwilling to dirty their hands. But it wasn't why we lost.

What the Republicans really did was to rope a couple of dopes. That's the lesson Barack Obama should learn from the fate of Dukakis and Kerry. Engage with McCain on things voters care about and talk honestly about what they don't like about Republicans. But don't make excuses about dirty GOP tactics to explain why the electorate rejects Democratic candidates, when what voters really eschew then and now is failure of judgment, lack of common sense and intellectual dishonesty.

The 1980s saw a bigger than usual glut of aggressive young males. Motivated by profits from the black market created by a brainless drug war, urban gangbangers were scaring aging children of the Depression known as Reagan Democrats.

So Lee Atwater and Roger Ailes, aided by minions in the basement of the Republican National Committee, dredged up a resonant metaphor for everything Reagan Democrats loved to hate about crime-coddling liberals: Willie Horton, the murderer sentenced to life in prison, who pillaged his way through Maryland on a weekend prison pass.

Yet that's not what really happened.

The Massachusetts program, a rehabilitation effort signed into law in 1972, was applied to convicted murderers by the commonwealth's Supreme Court, and Dukakis, in his first term as Massachusetts governor, vetoed an attempt to overturn the court. After scores of Pulitzer Prize-winning stories by the Lawrence (Mass.) Eagle-Tribune, the law that allowed Horton his pass was overturned in a bill signed by Dukakis himself on April 28, 1988, after the issue was raised in presidential politics at a Democratic debate April 12 in New York by ... Al Gore! Yes, the same Nobel laureate Hollywood liberals adore, not some fire-breathing, right-wing nut.

But to this day, in the left-liberal imagination, it was Republican racists who did poor Dukakis in.

No. It was Michael Dukakis who did himself in, because he seemed more interested in the privileges of criminals than the rights of victims. If Horton had been a blond, blue-eyed Minnesotan, letting him out on a pass still would have struck voters as taking rehab theory to its illogical conclusion.

That first comforting myth attempts to mask Dukakis' lack of judgment and common sense

(not uncommon in über-rational, otherwise decent men) by demonizing motives of the opposition. The Swift Boat canard goes directly to Kerry's intellectual dishonesty in trying to have it both ways on the fundamentals of war and peace.

The Beltway Democratic geniuses who gave us Kerry were convinced they needed a military hero to carry an anti-war banner against a war-making weekend warrior.

The best and the brightest among the party elders did their best to push Howard Dean off the stage and nominate Lt. Kerry, who reported for duty in Boston with a speech performance that told the nation everything it needed to know: He was for the war in Vietnam. He was against the war in Vietnam. Just as he voted for the war in Iraq but now he was against the war in Iraq.

Or was he? Because, just weeks later, Kerry said he would have voted for authorizing the war, even if he'd known there were no weapons of mass destruction.

Enter Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, with its smarmy TV spot asking whether Kerry deserved those medals. Hapless voters must have wondered: "If he's trying to be on both sides of two war debates at the same time, is he really a hero? Is he any better than the dolt who got us into this mess?"

So, Obama, don't you delude yourself into thinking you win just by being quick to defend yourself against nasty demagogues. Take it right to them. Show no fear. You were right in 2002; McCain is still wrong in 2008. You've got judgment. He's a stubborn old man.

Nobody wins an election, or leads a nation, by talking down to the collective common sense of citizens or by trying to split every difference. Take no comfort in those myths.

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