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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Running With Blinders

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AT this point in the fall campaign, unabashed negativity clogs every media outlet. The stench of foul political advertising is everywhere, and one senses that little will change: Americans once again will hold their noses and vote.

For this round, there really isn't much to be done. But looking to the 2008 presidential race, there is still time to find a new way of campaigning — specifically, for progressive candidates to consider a fresh approach to running for office.

Why progressives? Because it's in their interest: pervasive negativity takes a far greater toll on progressive causes than on conservative ones. Conservatives typically rail against big government and bureaucrats. But by attacking the current administration, progressives unwittingly join the anti-government chorus. The differences between the two — one side making general attacks, the other specific ones — are details. Both project negative messages about government, but the advantage still goes to the conservatives.

To level the playing field, and restore clarity to progressive values, I propose “the forward-looking campaign.”

The rules are simple. Never mention the opponent. Don't talk about the opponent's policies. Don't question the opponent's character. Don't talk about votes the opponent may have cast last week, last year or even 10 years ago. Refuse to run against anything or characterize any group; choose instead to run for something. Rather than engaging the opposition, the forward-looking candidate will engage the American people in a conversation about our future, keeping the focus on what we can accomplish as a nation and as individuals.

This is not just a commitment to be positive. Many candidates have tried that and failed. I was one of them. In 1992, I ran what many would consider a positive congressional campaign; my advertising never mentioned my opponent. But during a debate, I read statements she had made about me, noting that they were inaccurate. I made the corrections and moved on, doing so — I thought — without venom.

The next day's newspapers, however, described my actions as a personal assault, suggesting that sparks flew when I “stood up to attack.” Any luster I had gained from being positive had been tarnished.

I should have known then what is now quite obvious: one person's "clarification" is another person's "brutal attack." This is why the forward-looking candidate commits to avoiding any mention of the opposition, focusing instead on those whom he seeks to serve. It is a campaign promise that can be kept before a single vote is cast.

This commitment must be announced at the very outset, and must be the most visible element of the campaign throughout the early months. No matter how negative any other campaign chooses to be, voters must know that there is one candidate who refuses to put a foot on the slippery slope. What matters to the forward-looking candidate is where we can go and how we can get there. There is confidence and power in making that kind of statement.

There are also tactical reasons for the approach. It cuts through the background noise of American politics. It responds to the national disgust with negative campaigning. It gives voters an easy handle on the candidate, distinguishing him or her from others in the race.

And the approach is a natural shield. A forward-looking candidate who emerges from the Iowa caucuses would be difficult to attack; he would have spent much of a year building a case for this new model. He can stay visibly focused on the future, adopting a posture that suggests that anything else — any sideways glance — is a distraction. At last, there would be a penalty for unleashing negative ads, because the mere fact of the ads would be more important than their content. It is political jujitsu.

The first conversation I had along these lines was with Senator Gary Hart, as we considered media strategies for his 1988 presidential campaign. (He was then the Democratic front-runner; I was his press secretary.) We talked of a campaign in which every commercial would feature Mr. Hart looking into the camera, speaking directly to voters. In some of the ads, he would note how attacks by faceless announcers were damaging American politics, and would promise that his campaign would never rely on them.

As we considered various possibilities, we hit on an interesting bonus: Every negative ad, in every race in the country, could serve as a reminder that one candidate was taking a principled approach. We never saw this approach play out, as Mr. Hart's campaign ended abruptly following allegations of an extramarital affair. But the brutal attacks that came to define that election season suggested that we might have been right to consider the strategy.

The forward-looking campaign can help a progressive candidate satisfy America's yearning for moral values in politics. The landscape is crowded with political leaders who talk of morality, and who wear their Christian values on their sleeves. (The religious values of love and forgiveness, of course, are often contradicted or overwhelmed by political tactics evoking hate, fear or vengeance.) Rather than framing divisive issues like abortion and gay marriage to project its values, the forward-looking campaign would let its very conduct do the job. Without mentioning any religion, it could project religious values.

We reap what we sow. Divisive campaigns lead to divided government, a fate the American people can no longer afford. The forward-looking candidate, focused not just on electioneering but on governance,

knows we must ultimately join hands — so he stops pointing fingers.

The 2004 election, according to some, was a race between fear and anger. Republicans raised fears; Democrats expressed anger. But it is obvious in the abstract that anger could never defeat fear; the two emotions are too closely linked. A forward-looking campaign offers a better strategy for combating fear. It offers, finally, respect and hope.

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