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 **Accentuating the negative**

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Last September, when the presidential race was close, Barack Obama tried to quell a flap in the news media over what he had intended as a routine jibe. "You can put lipstick on a pig," Obama had said of the claim that picking Sarah Palin as his running-mate showed John McCain to be a reformer. "It's still a pig." Barraged with accusations of sexism, Obama eventually took time out at a campaign stop to address the swelling controversy.

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Accentuating the negative

DAVID GREENBERG

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"Fairy tale" ... "Dr. King's dream began to be realized when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964". ... "People are caught up in the concept"

Obama's partisans, who had lately been lamenting what seemed like his Michael Dukakis-like diffidence, now exulted in this gust of straight talk.

Yet observers who lacked an intense belief in Obama's moral superiority—even if they were partial to him all the same—could be forgiven for marveling not at his straight talk but at his straight face.

Hadn't the primary season teemed with this kind of feigned umbrage? Hadn't his own campaign fomented a useful passion among his foot soldiers by fanning similar controversies?

"No, No. There is nothing to base that on as far as I know." ... "working, hard-working Americans, white Americans" ... "Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in June in California."

Hadn't he seized on comments such as Hillary Clinton's praise of Lyndon Johnson to the supposed detriment of Martin Luther King,

Jr., as racist or John McCain's commitment to keep troops in Iraq as evidence of unrestrained warmongering?

Although these flaps from the campaign trail now seem distant and frivolous, they frequently turned last year's primary and general elections into miniature referenda about who wronged whom. These referenda Obama almost always won. And although other factors, especially the tanking economy, obviously contributed more directly to his November victory, it would be a mistake to overlook the importance of his skill at mastering the politics of negative attacks.

When Obama went negative against others, he carefully singled out aspects of his opponents' characters that, he argued, American politics itself had to transcend; he associated his foes with the worst of the old politics and himself with the best of the new. When others fired at him, in contrast, he was almost always able to turn the criticisms back upon them and portray them—through feigned outrage, among other tactics—as perpetuating those selfsame blights on our politics.

The widespread obsession with "negativity" that came to a head in 2008 expressed long-brewing concerns about the place of partisanship, conflict, and civility in our political life. For at least two decades, journalists, scholars, political consultants, and the public have grown increasingly fretful about the tenor of politics, with "negative campaigning" serving as a focus for these anxieties. A raft of books on the subject the last decade or so has offered dueling theories about the effects of such negativity in politics. And although these books vary too much in approach and definition to yield hard-and-fast generalizations, the overall surge of in-

70 **DISSENT** Spring 2009



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