

"Writing the truth  
as I see it;  
trying not to  
offend  
those who will  
disagree."

# The truth as I see it™

Idaho Common Sense™



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## Civility in presidential politics

June 23, 2008

Will civility ever return to presidential campaigns? Is it reasonable to hope for respectful debating? Or, are we obliged to accept the mudslinging as a given in politics? What would our founding fathers think if they were to witness one of today's presidential campaigns? Would they be impressed or would they be embarrassed? Can we ever return to the ethical debating they so prized?

ABC declared 2008 the "dirtiest presidential campaign in history." With estimates of the cost of this year's election exceeding \$1 billion, will the candidates see a choice other than negative campaigning? There is no second place. "The art is to damage your opponent without getting caught doing it," said Rob Shealy, a campaign strategist who was convicted for violating campaign laws.

Negative phone calls use questions to coerce opinion. Discussing Obama, the caller says, "He has taken millions from big banking and energy interests that have legislation pending before the Senate. Does this influence your opinion of him?" An Obama supporter claimed the Clintons made divisive comments meant to "suppress the vote, demoralize voters, and distort the record." President Clinton retaliated claiming the media was "carrying Obama's water." Obama sent mailers claiming Clinton's healthcare plan forced people to sign up, penalized those who did not, and was disingenuous. The Clinton camp responded, characterizing the mailer as "outrageous as having Nazis march through Skokie, Illinois."

McCain claimed Romney wanted a firm timetable for withdrawing troops from Iraq. Romney retaliated saying Ronald Reagan would have found McCain's tactics "reprehensible." McCain countered that Romney left Massachusetts with "high taxes and a large debt."

The list goes on and on, with the toughest months still ahead. This was just the primaries. Now we enter the general election, when the gloves will come off. And, they will come off.

How did our founding fathers behave during a presidential election? Our first President, George Washington, stepped down after eight years in office. John Adams, his vice president, became our second President. His campaign for re-election in 1800 demonstrates the behavior of our gentlemen founders while running for office. The primary opponents were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, having decidedly different visions of the role of the federal government. Let us read how these gentlemen behaved.

Jefferson's opponents described him as a "hopeless visionary, a weakling . . . an atheist." Adams was characterized as a "monarchist, more British than American. He was ridiculed as "old, addled, mad, and toothless." Adams' supporters distributed a leaflet portraying Jefferson as a "fraud, a cheat, and a coward."

Not to be outdone, Jefferson's campaign countered that Adams was going to marry one of his sons to a daughter of King George III, reuniting the United States with the British Empire, allowing his family to become a dynasty.

The President of Yale University said if Jefferson was elected "the Bible will be burned and our wives and daughters will be the victims of legal prostitution."

Adams described John Hamilton, a long time nemesis who liked neither Jefferson nor Adams, as ". . . a man devoid of every moral principle, a bastard . . ."

The Connecticut Courant warned that if Jefferson was elected, "murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced. . ."

Jefferson's campaign added to their description of Adams, "fat and toothless," while Adams claimed, "Mr. Jefferson hates the Constitution." According to Adams, Jefferson would ruin the financial system, creating bankruptcy and beggary. Hamilton said Jefferson secured his estate at Monticello through "robbery and fraud."

It seems our modern day politicians are lightweights compared to our founders. In those days, they knew how to play hardball. Most of our modern candidates could neither throw nor take the kinds of punches used during the infancy of our country.

At first blush, this behavior seems inappropriate, unnecessary, and unseemly. Shouldn't this behavior be beneath a presidential candidate? Even so, could it serve a purpose; could it be useful, even necessary? We are electing a person to the presidency of the United States of America, to a position that is the most powerful in the world. There are no classes to take, no exams to pass, no vocational training available. They must masterfully deal with allies and adversaries alike. **The president must be seasoned in life, stable in adversity, and solid in conviction and principle.**

Might I suggest the presidential campaign is the final seasoning, the final tempering of their character, preparing them for the most difficult job in the world? Might I suggest the unfair statements, the unfair tactics, the lies, the innuendos, the rumors – all are important to the molding of a President. If the process breaks a candidate, could they face a Gorbachov? Would they be able to deal with the complexities of the office if they were unable to navigate through the campaign? Perhaps the fair and the unfair tactics are needed for the final molding, the final seasoning, the final tempering of a president.

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