Civility is casualty as campaigns spar

‘Pig’ remark puts heat on Obama

By Scott Helman
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RIP, civility.

Remember when Senators John McCain and Barack Obama promised a kinder, gentler presidential race? They said the issues would be front and center, the nasty personal attacks kept at bay, and they even floated the quaint notion of traveling the country together to engage voters in a respectful competition of ideas.

Goodbye to all that.

With less than 60 days to Election Day, the rival campaigns are at each other's throats. In the last two days alone, put-downs have flown like daggers: McCain's campaign called Obama's "disturbing," "desperate," "offensive," and "disgraceful." Obama's campaign fired back with "pathetic," "perverse," "dishonorable," and "shameful." Though McCain has more often been the aggressor, the back-and-forth - to borrow a recent McCain campaign description of Obama running mate Joe Biden - has reached "a new low."

The hard-fought race has become progressively uglier, but the catalyst for the latest rhetorical devolution was a remark Obama made Tuesday in criticizing McCain for trying to obscure his similarity to President Bush on foreign and domestic policy.

"You can put lipstick on a pig - it's still a pig," Obama said at a Virginia campaign stop. "You can wrap an old fish in a piece of paper called change, and it's still going to stink after eight years."

The McCain campaign, through surrogates,
press statements, and an Internet attack ad, immediately sought to establish the comment as a sexist attack on the GOP vice presidential nominee, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, given her now-famous quip at last week's Republican National Convention: "You know, they say the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick."

Never mind that McCain himself has used "lipstick on a pig" on several past occasions, including once last year to describe the healthcare plan of Senator Hillary Clinton, whose very experience with sexism during the primary race McCain references in his Web ad.

Yesterday, before an education-themed event in Norfolk, Va., Obama sought to refocus the campaign on issues, expressing frustration that the media had seized on the "catnip" of a "cynical" and "insincere" charge of sexism by the McCain campaign.

"I love this country too much to let them take over another election with lies and phony outrage and Swift Boat-politics," Obama said, referring to Republican attacks in 2004 on Senator John F. Kerry's Navy career. "We have real problems in this country right now, and the American people are looking to us for answers, not distractions, not diversions, not manipulations."

Biden, speaking at a Boston fund-raiser yesterday, was more direct. "I'm going to smack 'em right in the chops," he said.

Though McCain and Palin ignored the latest dust-up during a rally yesterday before 23,000 people in Fairfax, Va., campaign spokesman Brian Rogers fired back at Obama's comments in a statement: "Barack Obama can't campaign with schoolyard insults and then try to claim outrage at the tone of the campaign. His talk of new politics is as empty as his campaign trail promises."

McCain's campaign also released a new TV ad yesterday defending Palin and claiming that "as Obama drops in the polls, he'll try to destroy her."

Today, the seventh anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, may bring the only cease-fire until Election Day. McCain and Obama are pulling their TV ads and refraining from attacks as they appear together at ground zero and a Columbia University forum on community service.

In a bitter fight, the political risks are greater for Obama, said Stephen Ansolabehere, a professor of government at Harvard University.

"Given who the candidates are, I think it will probably hurt Obama more, mainly because a large part of his message is sort of rising above normal politics, changing politics," he said. "Whereas McCain's been through a couple of these campaigns before, and the message is a little less about that. It's more about experience."

Ansolabehere said that with the political climate so conducive to Democrats, Obama should keep doing what he has been trying to do since the two party conventions - turning the discussion back to issues. Nearly half the respondents to a Washington Post/ABC News poll released this week listed candidates' positions on issues as their top concern, and Obama leads McCain among those voters by almost 20 percentage points.

If the past few weeks are any guide, today's lull in the rancor will be short-lived.
McCain, despite his past reputation as a reformer with a bipartisan ethos, has made several dubious accusations against Obama. Speaking about Iraq this summer, he said Obama wanted to “lose a war to win an election.” Without evidence to support the contention, McCain’s campaign asserted that Obama canceled a planned visit to a military hospital in Germany during a weeklong foreign trip in July because he couldn’t bring media with him. On Tuesday, McCain’s campaign released a TV ad falsely claiming that a bill Obama voted for in the Illinois Senate promoted “comprehensive sex education” for kindergartners.

Obama has limited most of his attacks to issues, though his aides and surrogates have gone more directly after McCain and Palin. Last month, US Representative Robert Wexler, a Florida Democrat, and an Obama spokesman in Florida both said wrongly that Palin, in the 2000 race, had endorsed Pat Buchanan, whom they identified as a “Nazi sympathizer.” Republicans were also howling in protest yesterday after Carol Fowler, chairwoman of the South Carolina Democratic Party, told Politico that Palin’s “primary qualification seems to be that she hasn’t had an abortion.” Fowler later apologized.

There have been glimmers of congeniality during the race, notably a McCain TV ad on the night Obama became the first African-American to win a major party’s nomination congratulating Obama on his achievement. But while that heartens Cassandra Dahnke, cofounder of the Texas-based Institute for Civility in Government, she said the tenor of the campaign makes it difficult to remain optimistic.

"Until the American population says, 'No, attack ads will not work' and votes that way, change is going to be slow," she said.

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