WASHINGTON—Oh, the outrage.

John McCain's campaign people are said to be suffering hurt feelings over Barack Obama's comment that McCain's policies are like lipstick on a pig. (And they are asking you to give money to make it better.)

Don't cry for them. And don't believe Obama was upset on behalf of the middle class when McCain joked that a rich person is one who makes $5 million.

These are hardened pols. Their sensibilities are not so meltingly tender.
When a candidate or his war room issues a huffy demand for an apology from the other side, you know they are having a good day. This is the Outrage Machine in motion, keeping the conflict going, spitting out a campaign ad and leveraging the whole sorry mess into a fundraising opportunity.

Manufactured grievances are flying in this campaign. "The bad news is, some of this stuff resonates," says Eric Dezenhall, a damage-control specialist.

"The good news is, it's only a matter of minutes before we move on to the next outrage."

The outrage of the minute arose Tuesday when Obama used a couple of metaphors to describe how McCain in his view would carry on like President Bush. "You can put lipstick on a pig," he said. "It's still a pig. You can wrap an old fish in a piece of paper called change. It's still going to stink after eight years."

McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin, was nowhere in sight in the long preamble -- Obama was talking about the Republican presidential nominee and Bush.

But because Palin is a woman and made a lipstick joke at the Republican convention, the McCain campaign decided to take the Democrat's lipstick remark as a sexist smear.

Emotionally wounded fishermen have yet to be heard from. Aggrieved pig farmers are mum.

The McCain campaign quickly created an Internet ad juxtaposing Palin's joke with Obama's crack, apparently working through the night if not through a veil of tears to show what a terrible thing Obama had said about their woman.

The chairman of the Michigan Republican Party seemed close to needing therapy.

"What an outrage!" screeched an online appeal for money from Saul Anuzis. "I need you to click here now to make a secure online donation to the Michigan Republican Party so we can fight back against Obama and the Democrats' false and sexist attacks on Governor Palin. ... Time is of the essence!"

Never mind that McCain had described Hillary Rodham Clinton's health plan as lipstick on a pig last year.

Obama appeared outraged at the McCain campaign's outrage.

"What their campaign has done this morning is the same game that has made people sick and tired of politics in this country," Obama said Wednesday. "They seize on an innocent remark, try to take it out of context, throw up an outrageous ad because they know that it's catnip for the news media."

Obama avoids that kind of slick politicking himself. Not.

He's getting more mileage than a hybrid car over McCain's answer to a question at Saddleback Church about what constitutes a rich person. "Some of the richest people I've ever known in my life are the most unhappy," McCain began. "I think that rich should be defined by a home, a good job, an education. ..."

So far so good, but then McCain quipped, "How about $5 million?" Laughter followed, then McCain said, "No, seriously. ..."

Too late. Obama has been pit-bulling and hockey-moming that remark ever
Obama’s Outrage Machine also kicked into gear late Tuesday when McCain released an ad claiming the Democrat had voted for legislation to teach kindergartners comprehensive sex education.

Calling the ad "shameful and downright perverse," Obama campaign spokesman Bill Burton went on to say: "Last week, John McCain told Time magazine he couldn’t define what honor was. Now we know why."

But McCain did not tell Time that he was unable to define honor. Plainly cranky in an interview, he refused to give his definition, saying, "I defined it in five books."

All campaigns, Dezenhall says, are populated by operatives "with an active investment in perpetuating a faux pas or a crisis." That's how offhand comments get twisted into frontal assaults. And it may not matter whether or not a campaign has the facts right when it makes an accusation.

What counts, he says, is whether the charge is plausible and plays to type -- that McCain is a rich, out-of-touch Republican, for example, or that "Obama is not from America but from an offshore boutique that doesn't value Middle America."

Dezenhall got an early education in remarks-gone-wild as a young aide in Ronald Reagan's White House. There he helped to tamp down the fuss over the president's suggestion that trees cause pollution. Now he helps companies and other clients manage scandal in an age when Internet innuendo spreads at lightning speed.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center and author of 15 books on politics, said the McCain campaign would have been on more solid ground if it had accused Obama of ageism instead of sexism.

Obama's description of McCain's policies as "old fish in a piece of paper called change" could have been yet another hint about McCain's age -- 72. Democrats have already suggested he is "losing his bearings" and "can't even remember anymore" how many houses he has.

But Republicans don't want a big discussion about McCain's age. Outrage has its limits.
Campaign shocks! The Outrage Machine is on a roll – Boston.com

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