



Combating the Culture of Corruption

Student Handout #6: **FactCheck.org, "Smear or Be Smeared?"**

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The DNC plans "unlimited" spending against McCain; some of its claims are misleading.

Summary

The Democratic National Committee proposes to spend unlimited amounts of money to "tell the real story" about John McCain before Republicans can "start smearing" the eventual Democratic nominee. But the line of attack the Democrats outline to their potential donors in an e-mail contains some claims that are false or misleading.

- The DNC paints McCain as favoring "endless war" in Iraq. What McCain actually said is that he wouldn't mind a hundred-year troop presence "as long as Americans are not being injured or harmed or wounded or killed."
- It says McCain "looked the other way" rather than investigate Jack Abramoff and a Republican "Culture of Corruption." In fact, McCain's investigation led to a prison term for Abramoff and the downfall of several powerful Republicans. His investigators didn't probe members of Congress directly, but that wasn't the job of his Indian Affairs Committee. And in any case, federal prosecutors opposed a competing congressional investigation which might have interfered with their own efforts.
- The DNC message makes criticisms of McCain that could be directed at its own leading candidates as well. It notes that he lacks training in economics, which is equally true of Clinton and Obama. And it accuses him of "staggering" reliance on lobbyists for campaign help, when Clinton also has substantial aid from lobbyists and Obama has some from former lobbyists.

If recent history is any guide, the preemptive attack that the DNC outlines in this message will be followed by similar attacks by Republicans. Past elections have included spiraling rounds of attacks by both parties, in which each side claims to be responding in kind to the other.

Analysis

According to this [fundraising pitch](#), the DNC plans a massive advertising campaign that will give voters what we judge to be a distorted picture of Arizona Sen. John McCain's positions. The mass e-mail was sent out to the party faithful Feb. 6, the day after

McCain emerged from Super Tuesday as the clear front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, and even before former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney suspended his run for the GOP nomination. The subject of the e-mail: "How we'll beat John McCain."

In the message, party chairman Howard Dean complains that McCain is a "media darling" whose "carefully-crafted image" can't be trusted. He asks for contributions to finance a series of attacks. "Only the Democratic Party is legally allowed to spend unlimited amounts of money to back our nominee and tell the real story about John McCain," he writes. "Let's get going."

A 100-Year War?

The DNC's message portrays McCain as bent on fighting an "endless" war in Iraq.

DNC: We can't afford four more years with a President who fights an endless war in Iraq. ... On the war, McCain scoffed at Bush's call to leave troops in Iraq for 50 years, saying "Make it a hundred!"

That of course is a serious distortion of what McCain actually said to a town-hall meeting in New Hampshire back on Jan. 3. His actual words are [posted in a video](#) on YouTube. Far from advocating "endless war," he said the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq would be "fine with me" *provided that they're not being killed or wounded*. Here's the full quote:

McCain, Jan. 3: Make it a hundred. ... We've been in Japan for 60 years. We've been in South Korea for 50 years or so. That would be fine with me, as long as American, as long as Americans are not being injured or harmed or wounded or killed. It's fine with me and I hope it would be fine with you if we maintained a presence in a very volatile part of the world where al Qaeda is training, recruiting and equipping and motivating people every single day.

It should be noted that both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, despite their frequent talk of withdrawing from Iraq, have [said repeatedly](#) that they would maintain at least some troops in a combat role in Iraq for some time, possibly their entire term of office.

There's little doubt that McCain is less eager than either Clinton or Obama to bring troops home without further suppression of insurgent attacks. But it's a rank falsehood for the DNC to accuse McCain of wanting to wage "endless war" based on his support for a presence in Iraq something like the U.S. role in South Korea.

"Culture of Corruption"

Perhaps the most twisted claim the DNC makes about McCain is this:

DNC: [McCain] looked the other way as Jack Abramoff bought and paid for the Republican Party and the Culture of Corruption.

The truth is that McCain, as chairman of the Senate's Indian Affairs Committee, vigorously pursued an investigation into how tribes had been fleeced by the mostly Republican lobbyists they hired to back their casino ventures. Federal prosecutors later sent a number of players in the scandal to prison, including lobbyist Jack Abramoff and Republican Rep. Bob Ney of Ohio. The scandal also [entangled](#) and contributed to the downfall of ex-Rep. Tom DeLay of Texas, the former Republican majority leader, who once described Abramoff as "one of my closest and dearest friends." It also contributed to the defeats of Republican Sen. [Conrad Burns](#) of Montana and eight-term Republican Rep. [Richard Pombo](#) of California. Even McCain's critics [admit](#) he kept pressure on the Bush Justice Department while it investigated Abramoff. To say that he "looked the other way" is false.

The DNC and others point to a [news item](#) from 2005 in the Capitol Hill newspaper *Roll Call*, which said McCain assured colleagues that his investigation wasn't aimed at them. According to the report, McCain said at the weekly lunch of the GOP's Steering Committee, "It's not our responsibility in any way to involve ourselves in the ethics process [of senators]. ... That was not the responsibility of the Indian Affairs Committee." But that should come as no surprise; investigating possible misconduct by senators is the job of the Senate Ethics Committee (spelled out on page 12 of the [Senate Ethics Manual](#)).

Furthermore, the Ethics Committee [publicly declined](#) in 2006 to investigate the Abramoff affair, because the Justice Department was already conducting criminal investigations and had told the committee that a parallel Senate probe could interfere. Even the Ethics Committee's Democratic vice chairman, Sen. Tim Johnson of South Dakota, concurred in that decision. We fail to see how the DNC can with any honesty criticize McCain for failing to do the job of another committee, especially when that panel's leading Democrat feared that a congressional investigation might jeopardize possible criminal cases.

The DNC's Glass House

The DNC also throws some stones at McCain that could be hurled at their own leading candidates.

- **Economics:** The DNC paints McCain as untrained to run the economy: "McCain has said: 'I know a lot less about economics than I do about military and foreign policy issues. I still need to be educated.' " That's an accurate [quote](#). But while McCain wasn't trained as an economist, neither were Obama or Clinton. Clinton has touted her experience working for children and health care. Obama talks about his experience organizing the poor and low-income workers in Chicago. None of the three senators sit on the Finance Committee, the Banking Committee or the Budget Committee. We'll be interested to hear the DNC explain how a graduate of Harvard or Yale law schools is any better educated about economics or the economy than an Annapolis grad who has been in Congress longer than the two Democrats put together.

- **Lobbyists:** The e-mail criticizes McCain for his reliance on lobbyists to raise campaign money, implying that his past crusades for stricter campaign-finance regulation and tightened congressional ethics laws were insincere efforts to "score political points":

DNC: After championing campaign finance reform and ethics legislation to score political points, he now has a staggering amount of lobbyists involved in every aspect of his campaign.

This is a reference to a recent [report](#) by Public Citizen, the group founded by Ralph Nader, which has tallied 59 persons who are or formerly were registered as lobbyists serving as "bundlers" (fundraisers) for McCain's campaign. That's more than for any other candidate, and Public Citizen said McCain's list is growing.

However, neither of the leading Democratic candidates are entirely innocent on this score. Clinton [voted](#) for the McCain-Feingold campaign finance legislation in 2002, and nevertheless has 20 lobbyist-bundlers aiding her campaign, according to the Public Citizen report. And even Obama, who crusaded for congressional ethics legislation last year, has 10 fundraisers whom Public Citizen identified as lobbyist-bundlers. In his case, all are *former* lobbyists and none are now registered.

Closer to the Mark

The DNC is closer to the mark on some other matters. Briefly:

- **Abortion:** The DNC says "McCain has vowed to appoint judges who would overturn Roe v. Wade," the Supreme Court decision that makes most abortions legal. McCain has come pretty close to saying just that. On his [Web site](#) he says, "John McCain believes Roe v. Wade is a flawed decision that must be overturned, and as president he will nominate judges who understand that courts should not be in the business of legislating from the bench."
- **Immigration:** The e-mail accuses McCain of running "as far to the right as he can" on immigration and of "aligning himself with the most extreme elements of the Republican Party." And in fact, McCain [said](#) in the most recent GOP debate that he would not vote again for the immigration bill he sponsored in 2005 with Democratic Sen. Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts. He said he now believes "the people want the border secured first" before dealing with those who already are here illegally. At an earlier debate, Republican Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado, the party's most vocal critic of illegal immigration, noted happily that McCain and other GOP candidates had started to sound like him. He [said](#), "All I've heard is people trying to out-Tancredo Tancredo. It is great. I am so happy to hear it. It is a wonderful thing. It's a good message, yes. We want to secure the borders."

When Tancredo later dropped out of the GOP race, however, he [endorsed](#) former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, not McCain.

More to Come

The DNC is perfectly accurate when it notes that its rival, the Republican National Committee, is also laying plans to attack Clinton or Obama as soon as either of them sews up the Democratic nomination. We have no reason to think that the RNC's attacks will be any more accurate than the DNC's. In the 2004 campaign, both parties ran misleading ads against the other's nominee. In the 2006 congressional elections, we noted that the Democratic and Republican committees responsible for House campaigns both had become "factories for attack ads," and that the National Republican Congressional Committee in particular was responsible for "[mudslinging on an industrial scale](#)." We hope for better this year, but this DNC e-mail gives us little reason to expect it.

—by Brooks Jackson

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