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The Wright Friends

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

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The Wright Friends

Have There Been Other Instances When a Preacher Has Hurt a Candidate?

The most famous case of a preacher hurting a presidential candidate occurred in 1884 when Republican James Blaine was running against Democrat Grover Cleveland. One week before Election Day, a

Blaine supporter named the Rev. Samuel Burchard was introducing the candidate. To whip up the crowd, Burchard said the Democratic party was infested with “rum, Romanism, and rebellion.” It was an outrageous allegation that pointed an accusing finger at three groups of Americans – people against Prohibition, Catholic immigrants, and Southerners who had fought in the Civil War two decades earlier.

It took Blaine three days to renounce Burchard’s statement. But by then the slogan had seriously damaged a competitive Republican nominee who was defeated on Election Day. As a result of the 1884 contest, “Rum, Romanism and Rebellion” became the textbook case for the kind of thing NOT to say in a campaign.

All is fair in love and war – and politics is a kind of war. Campaign strategists have the “politics of personal destruction” down to a science. As David Farrelly pointed out in his article, “Rum, Romanism and Rebellion Resurrected,” statements that are potentially harmful to a presidential candidate require a mix of five elements to blow up a campaign. First, the statement itself must have something explosive in it. Even words lifted out of context may provide the gunpowder. Whether the utterance is true or false is beside the point. Whether it is a reasonable statement in context is also beside the point. If the statement has any hint of impropriety – if a perceived insult or outrageous claim can be teased out of it – then it can be used against a candidate.

Second, there must be an opportunistic opponent to strike the match – a political operative who sees the potential harm in what a candidate or his supporters have said. A skilled pol knows how to strike the match and throw it on the gunpowder.

Third, the resulting explosion in the public arena causes widespread publicity that embarrasses the candidate. The statement now becomes a public relations nightmare.

Fourth, once the explosion has been seen by the public, opponents do all they can to prevent the candidate from putting out the fire. Keeping the heat on, they throw gasoline on the flames to make the candidate apologize over and over. Then the media cover nothing of substance, but instead train their cameras and microphones on a squirming or frustrated or angry candidate reciting his mea culpas again and again.

Fifth, the statement haunts the candidate for the remainder of the campaign and sometimes long after. Again, this is due to skillful campaign strategists who repeatedly define a candidate in terms of the insult or outrageous allegation – even if uttered by a supporter and not the candidate himself.

It remains to be seen how much damage the Rev. Wright’s statements will inflict on Barack Obama’s quest to become the first African American president of the United States. The reverend’s controversial statements are too extreme for the mainstream, and they will surely be grist for the Republican mill between now and November 4th.

Speaking of the Republican mill, let us not forget that John McCain has his own preacher problem in John Hagee who has been accused of insulting Catholics and others.

For James Blaine in 1884, the tragedy was that a prominent supporter had the bad judgment to make a statement that seriously undercut the candidate he was supporting for president. Before Burchard’s blunder, Blaine had been assured that every effort was being made to woo Catholic voters. But once Catholics heard the untoward comment about the Democratic party, the race was lost. As Blaine bitterly observed, “The Lord sent upon us an ass in the shape of a preacher.”

(Question from Jim Mitchell, Grand Rapids)



Rev. Jeremiah Wright

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