

3-20-2008

## Campaign Vitriol

Gleaves Whitney  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask\\_gleaves](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves)

---

### ScholarWorks Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Campaign Vitriol" (2008). *Ask Gleaves*. 21.  
[https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask\\_gleaves/21](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/21)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ask Gleaves by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## Campaign Vitriol

Are presidential campaigns getting uglier and more personal compared to earlier times in American history?

Election 2008 seems to be showcasing every negative trick in the book: Race baiting, guilt by association, name calling, gender bashing and character assassination. The attacks of Sens. Clinton and Obama against each other are just a prelude to what will occur once the primary season is finished and Sen. McCain joins the fray. (He is smart to lay low for now and let the Democratic candidates wound each other.)

As ill tempered as the current campaign seems to be, it pales in comparison to several notorious contests in the 19th century. The nasty campaign of 1828 comes to mind. It was so hard on Andrew Jackson and his wife Rachel that she had an emotional breakdown and died of a heart attack before her husband's inauguration. Jackson never forgave his political enemies.

Another scurrilous contest occurred in 1800 when the country was still in its infancy and struggling to survive. Sadly, this ugly race implicated at least three of the nation's founding fathers.

President John Adams was running for re-election in 1800. Imagine how disappointed he was when his sitting vice president, Thomas Jefferson, made it known he was going to challenge his erstwhile friend for the White House. A rough analogy would be if Vice President Dick Cheney had challenged President George W. Bush for the job in 2004.

Adams and Jefferson had quite different ideas about how the new republic should take shape. Moreover, they developed a personal dislike for each another. Adams thought Jefferson was a radical kook who had become too sympathetic toward the French revolutionaries. Jefferson, for his part, called the overweight Adams "his rotundity" and believed he was too eager to cozy up to the British monarch.

Adams let his supporters conduct a whispering campaign to destroy the vice president's public reputation. Jefferson was accused of sleeping with his slave Sally Hemings and of fathering mulatto children by her. It was also alleged he had robbed a widow and her children of a trust fund. And because Jefferson had promoted freedom of conscience and argued against having established churches, he was accused of being an atheist who would burn down churches and lead the nation to ruin. New England ministers sympathetic to Adams warned so sternly of Jefferson's atheism that a number of older women, fearful he would win the election, actually buried the family Bible or hung it in the well.

Jefferson's supporters conducted a whispering campaign of their own. They charged Adams would turn into a tyrant if not stopped. As evidence, they pointed to the Alien and Sedition Acts, which subverted the Constitution and denied basic civil liberties to Adams's political opponents. He was also called unpatriotic since he supported the creation of a standing army and had monarchical tendencies that would undo the achievements of the American Revolution.

As if these personal attacks against each other were not enough, a third founding father got in on the act in a most egregious way. Alexander Hamilton wrote a private letter highly critical of Adams's character and policies. Once the letter found its way into the hands of Jefferson's supporters, it was made into a pamphlet that reached the multitudes.

I remind you: These were our founding fathers. Statesmen of the caliber of Adams, Jefferson and Hamilton were so driven by ambition they were willing to wink at whisper campaigns involving libel, slander and scandal mongering. Perhaps even worse, they led political parties that used armed militia to intimidate printers and others who got in their way. These party men made a mockery of George Washington, who pled in his Farewell Address not to let party differences tear the nation apart. To no avail: The 1800 campaign would go down as one of the ugliest in U.S. history.

In 2008, Clinton, Obama and McCain will have to aim pretty low to reach the depths our founders did in 1800.

*(Question from Patrick Reagan, Master of Public Administration candidate, Grand Valley State)*



This essay originally appeared in the Grand Valley *Lanthorn*.



[Read more Answers](#)