

commentary

from other pens...

Politicians, parties angle to pick opponents

Political candidates are stepping up efforts to pick the opponent they most want to face in the general election — a high-stakes strategy that appears to have succeeded in California earlier this year, but may backfire in Florida on Tuesday.

When California Gov. Gray Davis, a Democrat, spent \$10 million last spring attacking moderate Republican Richard Riordan before the Republican primary, it may have seemed an unusual strategy. But Riordan, former mayor of Los Angeles, lost the primary to conservative businessman William Simon, Davis' preferred general election opponent.

Now some other politicians around the country are following that same strategy, but finding it doesn't always yield the same results.

That appears to be the case in Florida, where the Democrats are now in a surprisingly close race for the party's gubernatorial nomination. Most people believed Democratic front-runner Janet Reno, a former U.S. attorney general, would win the party's nomination handily. But they thought she would face a steep uphill race against incumbent Jeb Bush.

While Reno has a strong following in south Florida, most expected the former Clinton administration official would have a tough time winning counties north of Palm Beach County.

Few Democrats would say it publicly, but privately many have hoped the campaign of Tampa attorney Bill McBride would take off. They felt McBride, a former Marine who served in Vietnam, offered the best chance of running a strong race against the president's younger brother.

Recent polls show Reno and McBride in a very close race just days before Tuesday's Democratic primary.

Bush campaign strategists saw that coming, and in recent weeks Republicans broadcast ads criticizing McBride's management of his law firm and his campaign finances. They say they weren't trying to pick their opponent, but did want to increase negative perceptions of him.

"It was a strange phenomenon in Florida," said Republican state chairman Al Cardenas. "Neither Bill McBride's opponents nor the press were pointing out his weaknesses."

Bush campaign spokesman Todd Harris said, "We did not want to be in a situation where we found ourselves in the middle of September running against an opponent who had been on the air for two months introducing himself to voters on his terms."

McBride has been helped by the Florida Education Association, which endorsed him early in the campaign and has helped fund the bulk of his nearly \$4 million advertising blitz.

State Democratic Chairman Bob Poe said Republicans were caught short by the cordial tone of the Democratic campaign.

"Republicans are frustrated because we're not acting like Democrats," Poe said. "We're notorious for coming out of the process bloodied."

Poe said Reno and McBride "both like and respect one another." While McBride ran an expensive campaign to raise his profile, Reno ran a low-key, grass-roots campaign that relied heavily on personal appearances.

The Republican ads against McBride were a direct assault, Poe said.

Political strategists note the approach of attacking a politician from the opposing party before a primary is not new, though it's gained visibility this year because of Davis' expensive campaign to help defeat Riordan.

Political scientist Lance deHaven Smith of Florida State University said the tactic may prove costly to the Bush team in Florida.

"I think it backfired a bit by raising McBride's visibility quickly," he said. Smith said the folksy McBride could be a tough opponent for Bush because he may have appeal in the largely rural Florida Panhandle as well as in his native central Florida. Strong McBride performances in those areas combined with the Democrats' natural advantage in south Florida could be a dangerous combination for Bush.

Democratic state chair Poe said the Bush assault on McBride "made a lot of Democrats think twice.

"If Bush doesn't want this guy, maybe they do."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for The Associated Press.



As a child I wondered what God looked like

I don't know about you, but as a child I wondered what God looked like.

I had a pretty good idea of how Jesus looked.

In fact, I began a collection of faces of Jesus by different artists. That collection hangs in my office. I love each one for different reasons.

As I've grown older and (hopefully) wiser, I realize that probably none of them look much like the human Jesus looked.

In fact today Americans would probably fear Jesus, because he actually looked like a Middle Eastern man. None of my pictures really show that; most of them are more like European or American faces.

I have also come to realize that most of us really don't recognize God.

We rely heavily on God's recognizing us, but we fail to see God most of the time.

To make my point, I offer this e-mail message



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by an unknown author:

"The man whispered, 'God, speak to me', and a meadowlark sang. But, the man did not hear.

So the man yelled, 'God, speak to me', and the thunder rolled across the sky. But, the man did not listen.

The man looked around and said, 'God let me see you.'

And a star shined brightly. But the man did not see.

"And, the man shouted, 'God show me a

miracle.'

And, a life was born. But, the man did not notice.

So, the man cried out in despair. 'Touch me God, and let me know you are here.'

Whereupon, God reached down and touched the man.

But, the man brushed the butterfly away and walked on."

This e-mail came with a verse added by someone else:

"The man cried, 'God, I need your help!' And an e-mail arrived reaching out with good news and encouragement. But, the man deleted it and continued crying."

And it had a warning: "Don't miss out on a blessing because it isn't packaged the way that you expect."

God is seen in everyone and everything around us - if we'll just look. I guess we all need to brush up on our God-recognition skills.

Shifting from 'leave-it-alone' will not be easy

President Bush wants to shift the government away from the "leave-it-alone" stance in the woods and start fighting the next round of forest fires before they start.

It's all well and good — to a point. But let's not kid ourselves. A century of fire suppression has left much of our government land ripe for fire.

We can't, at this point, thin enough fuel or remove enough logs to prevent more major fires in the West. Nor, for that matter, should we.

Bush's effort will create some jobs and open up some opportunities to the hard-pressed lumber industry in this half of the country.

Logging has been hit hard by environmental restrictions. The last major lumber mill in southern Colorado has closed, for instance, and now logs must be shipped out by rail.

Meantime, fuel continues to build up in National Forests, much of it in places where loggers cannot go — steep canyons, scenic areas, wilderness preserves.

To make sense, a new policy will have to recognize several things:

- Logging, done right, is not bad. It removes



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older, disease-prone trees and opens up the forest to new growth. And since today's loggers are required to clean up their mess, it doesn't despoil the land like the old-fashioned clear cuts did.

You can't thin enough forest to prevent all fires. Fire prevention efforts need to focus on areas where they can have an impact, around subdivisions and commercial centers.

A lot of this work will be in the hands of homeowners and land holders. Smokey Bear needs to hone his message and focus on teaching people how to build a "defensible space" around their property.

That means fewer trees and underbrush up close, no shake-shingle roofs, advance thought about how to keep fire away from homes.

- Fire is nature's way. A burned area may not look

beautiful, but to some extent, it is normal. Fire renews a forest, and allows secondary species such as the aspen trees so prized for their fall beauty, to grow.

Fire itself is not bad, and many fires should be allowed to burn. Scientists have seen in Yellowstone that even major fires are not exactly a disaster to nature. Within a few years, trees, grasses, shrubs and animals have come back, with increased diversity.

Despite some problems in the past, controlled burns can reduce fire danger. We need more, not less, burning in the woods.

Defensible is not that hard to achieve. When we lived in Colorado, for instance, we bought a house with a wood roof and a wood heating system. Not a good combination. Today it has a metal roof, which looks fine and is a heck of a lot safer.

Not everyone is going to like the idea of thinning out the forest, but then, not everyone can buy the idea of letting some fires burn — or of starting fires to prevent larger ones.

But with the burgeoning number of people trying to live close to nature, something needs to change. Educating everyone to that fact ought to be the first priority.

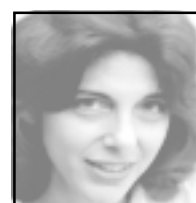
Tales from the techno valley and forest

On a recent August night in a central New York valley, 17-year-old Spencer Lee King murdered 14-year-old Annie "Nonie" Drummond. At least, that's what King reportedly told local police in the farming community of Fabius before being charged with stabbing, beating and burning Drummond to death in the farmhouse she shared with her grandfather, who was away that night on a camping trip. Poor Nonie, it seems, had lied to King about her age, and he "snapped."

The local papers and even The New York Times were full of the details — the two teen-agers shared "a zeal for MTV" and "a weakness for junk food." Clearly, this was a case that couldn't be reduced to the brevity of regional round-ups. Why? Sordid life and violent death are not by themselves considered noteworthy. What seems to have made this case news were its roots in rural youth and the poisonous fruit they bore in cyberspace. Lonely Nonie Drummond is thought to have been murdered on her grandfather's apple farm right smack in the middle of nowhere by a teen-age drifter she "met" on the Internet. She never got a real look at him until the night of her own death.

Leaving the crime scene particulars to the professionals, it doesn't require much imagination to take Nonie's fate as one more cautionary tale about the Internet and how "unfettered access" may work, insidiously, both ways. When we open ourselves up to that new, wired world out there — or, much worse, allow children to open themselves up — we expose ourselves to its shadowy denizens, many of whom shouldn't be entrusted with the family dog, much less our daughters.

Of course, as any techno-booster will tell you (even I'll admit it), looking for love in all the wrong chat rooms is rarely fatal. Indeed, Wired magazine breathlessly insists in its September issue that being "hyperconnected" to the Internet to achieve



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what it calls "full fluency" is actually good thing. In other words, Drummond may have wasted her own short life searching the flashing screens of a PC and MTV for fulfillment and purpose, but her more typical peers, the magazine reports, are poised to "unlock the potential of a transformative technology."

What does that mean? Unless telling all your friends what you are wearing to a party really, really fast is your idea of transformative technology, not much. Worse, some variation on Nonie's fate would seem to be just a click away from all too many kids spotlighted in Wired's rundown on teen techno-trends. That doesn't necessarily go for the cathode-gazed millions who park at Web pages like Neopets.com for an average of 50 minutes a day to "care" for such "pets" as cybunnies and poogles: They're just wasting their minds. But the youngsters desperately trolling chat rooms for prom dates are obviously at risk, along with all the kids learning social skills on instant-messengers, a mode of communication faster than the speed of e-mail that seems to strip away the natural protections of shyness and uncertainty. As Wired notes, "37 percent of IM-ing teens have used IM to say something they would not have said face-to-face."

More disturbing still are the teens Wired cutely calls "young experts in urges and acquisitions" — kids who post "flirty" photos of themselves, wish lists, links to online stores and even shipping instructions. "Mes gotta wishlist ;D love me? buy

something," lispily writes 16-year-old Tamme of Kernersville, N.C. Featuring shots of her bra (filled) and mouth (filled with braces), Tamme has posted a shopping list of appliances that runs from a heated eyelash curler, to a "Memorex Travelview 43055 Mobile VCR with 9-inch Color Screen," to a \$1,500 Compaq computer setup. One of Tamme's accompanying comments: "DWO... puh puh puh please :: gets on knees and begs."

Wired's accompanying comment: "The gift strategy seems to work, though police worry the sites can be a prowling ground for pedophiles." Gee, I wonder why.

Luckily, all the techno-news isn't bad. In Oregon's Silicon Forest outside Portland, just minutes from the software giant Intel, Wired reports that a small, computer-free private school called Swallowtail draws one-third of its students from families employed by the high-tech industry. No Luddites here — just parents who feel that computers (and television and movies and radio) are an obstacle to children's learning in the years before high school. Talk about counter-cultural. Their belief is that computer skills may be acquired in a few months, much like learning to drive a car, and hardly require 13 years of expensive, time-consuming drilling. They, as software professionals, should know. And we, as software neophytes, should stop — and think about it.

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