

Untruths: Campaign ads that bear false witness

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Barack Obama promised to practice a different kind of politics, a politics that would stick to the issues. Yet his campaign has produced an ad that shows an old photo of McCain, wearing an out-of-style suit and large glasses, in an effort to convey the message that McCain is an old, out-of-touch man, someone who doesn't even know how to use the Internet or even send an e-mail message. That's what is known as an ad hominem attack.

McCain likes to tout himself as a straight talker whose honesty builds trust. Yet a campaign ad by McCain links Obama to the down-and-dirty politics of the city of Chicago—a case of asserting guilt based on association. Another McCain ad, seizing on Obama's support for teaching kindergarteners about how to protect themselves from sexual predators, declares that Obama wants to teach sex education to children before they can read. That's a case of outright misrepresentation.

Even Karl Rove, a master of hardball politics, has said that McCain's ads have gone too far. And even Joe Biden, Obama's running mate, has criticized Obama's ad portraying McCain as a Luddite.

Amy Sullivan, writing in *Time* magazine, reports that PolitiFact.com, a fact-checking enterprise of the *St. Petersburg Times*, has tracked the veracity of presidential campaign statements and advertisements and concluded (in late September) that Obama's ratio of mostly true to mostly false claims was 65 to 33; McCain's was 47 to 51.

With deceptive ads and other methods, political campaigns regularly violate the commandment against bearing false witness. The Ten Commandments as a whole recognize that there are multiple ways to destroy another person: one way is by physical murder, and another way is by slander. Calvin said that whoever bears false witness against or slanders his neighbor creates war and kills his neighbor. The negative prohibition carries with it positive implications. That's why Luther explained

the commandment against bearing false witness this way: “You shall speak the best about your neighbor, in the market, in conversation, and elsewhere, and likewise in court.” The prohibition against bearing false witness is designed to secure the well-being of the neighbor and, by extension, the community.

Campaigns create misleading ads and negative characterizations because the strategy works. These ads color people’s views of the candidates. They will work until people stop paying attention to them and start rewarding candidates for telling the truth and sticking to the issues that matter. Until then, we will get not only the leaders we deserve but the campaigns we deserve.