

Cheney's 'warning' is the lowest blow yet

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Blow the whistle. Get the penalty box ready.

Vice president Dick Cheney was over the line, out of bounds, below the belt and just plain outrageous Tuesday when he suggested that a vote for Democratic nominee Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts would result in more terrorism.

"If we make the wrong choice, then the danger is that we'll get hit again and we'll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States," said the Veep in his usual low-key manner, belying the viciousness of his charge.

It might have been the most unfair campaign statement since the Lyndon Johnson campaign ran the "Daisy" ad back in 1964, suggesting that Republican candidate Barry Goldwater would start a nuclear war. The ad showed a little girl walking in a flower field and then switched to a film of a nuclear mushroom cloud.

That's how the Bush-Cheney team is conducting this campaign: no-holds barred, no rules, no limits to how low they will stoop. The foaming at the mouth keynote speech at the Republican convention by Sen. Zell Miller, the Democrat from Georgia, was no accident. It was the keynote; it set the tone for the convention and for the ugly campaign to follow.

When asked if it was fair to say that a terrorist attack would be the fault of people who voted for the Democratic ticket, Cheney's spokeswoman replied that his comment was taken out of context. Sure.

Cheney warned that the Democrats were likely to treat terrorism as a law-enforcement problem, not a military one. That is, waiting for the attack and then arresting the bad guys. Bush and Cheney, in contrast, are the great pre-emptors.

But that's a dubious proposition. The United States' approach to terrorism changed on Sept. 11, 2001 - for both parties. What was impossible the day before, an all-out war against al-Qaida, became instantaneously possible.

Why is the Bush-Cheney team slinging mud? Partly because it works. Their attack on Kerry's war record stopped the Democrats' momentum after the Democratic convention and made Kerry the issue instead of Bush.

It is also because things have gone so badly for the Bush-Cheney administration. What are they going to boast about? Does anybody really believe Bush's contention that democracy is just around the corner in Iraq? In fact, a London-based think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said the likely outcome in Iraq might well be a Lebanon-like civil war. And just this week, U.S. commanders admitted that the insurgents had gained control of key parts of central Iraq and there wasn't much hope of winning them back.

The Bush-Cheney administration made a huge gamble that it could run for re-election on a successful war in Iraq, replacing Saddam Hussein and building a stable government that would become a beacon of stability of freedom in the Mideast. It hasn't worked out that way at all.

If anything, the irony is that if the charge of making the United States more vulnerable to an attack points at anybody, it is the Bush-Cheney team. The manner in which it has handled the war in Iraq has undercut the effort against al-Qaida, alienated allies and increased hatred of the United States throughout the world. And just to add to the Republicans' problem, Tuesday just happened to be the day that the 1,000th American was killed in Iraq.

What would you do if you had that record to defend? Attack, of course. It's a tried-and-true tactic: Kick up enough mud and people won't see what is really going on.

Will Cheney get away with his attack? That's partly up to Kerry, who, until now, has been too slow to respond to the Republicans' predictable attack tactics. But ultimately it's up to the voters.

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