

# Bush, Kerry hit below belt early in race to White House

The early use of attack ads may be a result of private groups' increased spending

By Mark Silva  
The Orlando Sentinel (KRT)

American voters face the most bruising and costly campaign for the White House ever, with a brutal eight-month contest between President Bush and Democrat John Kerry already bristling with character assaults and hard-hitting television advertising.

With a battery of dueling TV ads now hitting voters in Florida and other critical battlegrounds — and with attacks certain to escalate — both sides risk alienating cynical voters just as the campaigns begin.

It's possible that "the public is going to get burned out over this," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Center for Public Policy at the University of Pennsylvania. Yet, she said, the issues that Bush and Kerry are battling about — terrorism, taxes, jobs and health care — are critical enough to keep voters engaged.

"We're seeing a new model of campaigning," Jamieson said. "The assumption has always been that you don't engage seriously at the general-election level until at least summer. You are now down to the specific case against each side at a very early time."

The expectation of a close, hard-fought election in November is driving this extraordinarily early exchange, fueled by a trio of dynamics producing a perfect political storm:

- The unusually early naming of a Democratic nominee who is challenging, even surpassing, the incumbent in opinion polling.
- Candidates unconstrained in what they can spend in record-setting spring and summer campaigns.
- A profusion of outside interest groups fueling ad wars that are unrestrained in spending and free to use venomous rhetoric that the candidates themselves dare not utter. Bush, ridiculing his rival as a waffler, on Friday rolled out an attack TV ad targeting Kerry as a tax-and-spender who is weak on terrorism.

Kerry, deriding the president as "reckless" on the world stage, has responded with his own ads but also is drawing reinforcement from allies — such as the anti-Bush groups MoveOn.org and The Media Fund — that are spending millions of dollars on attack ads against the president.

And this is only the start. "If we take President Bush's lead, it's going to ratchet up pretty quickly," said Harold Ickes, former aide to President Clinton and founder of

The Media Fund. Bush "has ratcheted it up pretty fast, given that this is an eight-month election ... We will conduct ourselves accordingly."

The president, gauging the severity of the contest, has come out of the Rose Garden. He is already campaigning hard, spending time each week in states he most hopes to win. And, Bush is airing TV ads warning of Kerry's "plan to pay for new government spending" and "raise taxes by at least \$900 billion."

Kerry proposes to rescind the tax cuts that Bush won for people with incomes over \$200,000 a year. With the money, he aims to provide insurance for most Americans lacking health care. His campaign calls Bush's ads "weapons of deception," although an Emory University analysis projected that Kerry's health plan could cost \$895 billion during 10 years.

On the stump, Bush accuses Kerry, a fourth-term senator from Massachusetts, of spending so much time in Washington that "he's taken both sides on just about every issue. ... My opponent clearly has strong beliefs — they just don't last very long."

Kerry accuses Bush of spearheading a reckless foreign policy and heartless domestic agenda. "Mr. President," Kerry declared in Florida last week, "bad, rushed decisions kill. ... Not giving American citizens health care kills, too."

This is high-octane talk for March.

"It's a danger for both of them to go so negative, because it really turns off voters," said Merle Black, professor of politics and government at Emory University. "There is something to the dignity of the office here, especially for Kerry — he needs to ratchet it down a little bit, because we are talking about the presidency."

Yet Bush and Kerry are raising the most important issue in a presidential election.

"It goes straight to character," Jamieson said. "If you can undermine trustworthiness, you can undermine a candidacy. In the exchange, Bush says, 'I'm steady, and he's indecisive.' Kerry comes back and says, 'There is a difference between indecision and stubbornness — your decisiveness is dangerous.'"

This is also financially costly cross-fire. But Bush, who has raised more than \$145 million for his campaign, already has surpassed a record that he set in 2000. And Kerry, imploring Democrats to unite after an exceptionally swift primary campaign, hopes to raise \$80 million.

Plus, Bush and Kerry are not alone in shoveling money into attack ads.

Thanks to reforms of campaign financing, which strictly limit the "soft money" that donors contribute to political parties or to candidates,

unregulated independent groups are flourishing and spending millions of dollars in ads this year.

Outside groups are freer to attack — such as one free-wheeler that slammed Democrat Howard Dean in Iowa's caucuses this winter: "Dean should take his tax-hiking, government-spending, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading ... Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs."

It was a Republican-leaning group that aired the most notorious campaign ads of modern times, an attack on the 1988 Democratic nominee, Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts. That ad featured Willie Horton, a convicted murderer who left a Massachusetts prison on a weekend furlough in 1987 and kidnapped a couple, raping the woman.

"Weekend prison passes — Dukakis on crime," concluded one ad sponsored by Americans for Bush, backed by the National Security Political Action Committee.

The ads helped President Bush's father, George H.W. Bush, overwhelmingly defeat Dukakis.

This president, like his father, will benefit from the support of independent committees attacking the Democrat. Citizens United, headed by a former Republican congressional aide, has aired a MasterCard ad parody picturing Kerry alongside Sen. Edward M. Kennedy: "Another rich, liberal elitist from Massachusetts who claims he's a man of the people. Priceless."

But this time, Democrats have amassed an army of their own.

Jim Jordan, Kerry's first campaign manager before an overhaul last fall, has opened a consulting firm representing three of the Democratic committees: The Media Fund, ACT and America Votes. Their national spokeswoman, Sarah Leonard, came from Dean's campaign.

The parties have organized their own computerized "opposition-research" shops spouting fountains of fodder for media covering the campaigns every day. Forty people do such research for the RNC effort.

The day Kerry met with Dean last week to start assembling a coalition of their supporters, the RNC Research Department was ready with "Dean's Greatest Hits" — a list of critical words Dean had for Kerry during their primary campaign.

"We're going to keep pounding, let me tell you," Kerry said last week, in unguarded remarks captured by microphone at a rally in Chicago. "We're just beginning to fight here."

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