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EDITORIAL

Obama and the obvious

BY ROGER E. HERNANDEZ

The issue of affirmative action is absent this presidential campaign so far, even though neither Democrats nor Republicans have been loath to exploit race and ethnicity when convenient.

None of their Web sites treats affirmative action as a major policy issue. Neither has it been a factor (has it been mentioned at all?) in debates -- so much so that when the conservative National Review Online wanted to castigate Hillary for her position on racial preferences, it had to refer to a press release from her Senate office about the Supreme Court's ruling in the University of Michigan case, back in 2003.

Of the major candidates' Web sites, it is Barack Obama's that contains the most direct references to affirmative action. It has three of his speeches from last year that mention it, including one in October in East L.A.

That Obama spoke about affirmative action in front of a largely Hispanic crowd is not without meaning. Neither is the fact that anti-affirmative-action activist Ward Connerly, who organized efforts to ban

racial preferences in California, Michigan and Washington, now has his eyes set on Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska and Oklahoma.

Does it foreshadow where the affirmative-action debate is heading? With all the anger about immigration, will the two issues become linked?

If they do, the link will not connect all immigrants to racial preferences -- just those deemed to be a "minority."

The way affirmative action works, no Albanian immigrant who owns a plumbing business will qualify for ethnic small business set-asides, but his Hispanic competitor will. The children of that Albanian will not get that extra boost because of ethnicity from college admissions offices, while the son of a Hispanic brain surgeon will be deemed needy and get special considerations.

This system says immigrants who are Hispanic, unlike immigrants from Europe, bring with them impediments that can only be overcome with outside help. Like a disease of some sort.

Sounds like something the rabid anti-immigrant right might rant about. But no. It's the left that supports ethnic preferences

insulting to their supposed beneficiaries.

Republicans have zero credibility on the issue. Most of the pack is too tainted by pandering to xenophobes, and even if McCain took a strong position against racial preferences, it would be dismissed as a case of Republicans doing what Republicans do.

Which is why the demise of affirmative action can only be set in motion by a Democrat. And who better than Obama, an intended beneficiary by reason of ethnicity, and at the same time someone who clearly does not need anybody's patronizing help?

In those three speeches on his Web site, Obama defended racial preferences. Yet in an appearance on ABC's "This Week" last May, he said affirmative action should become "a diminishing tool for us to achieve racial equality," and seemed to recognize it would be ludicrous for his children to be treated as anything other than "folks who are pretty advantaged."

Sometimes, what leadership requires is courage to spell out the obvious. ■

— Roger Hernandez is a syndicated columnist and writer-in-residence at New Jersey Institute of Technology.

OPINION

The temper-tantrum kid

BY RICH LOWRY

In full psychoanalytical mode, Bill Clinton once observed, "I was born at 16, and I'll always feel I'm 16."

In this, Bill Clinton displayed unusually acute self-awareness. After two terms as president of the United States and a post-presidential career as a world celebrity adored by all the great and good, Bill Clinton is still 16. In recent months, he has proved that adolescents can't be elder statesmen.

His performance on Hillary's behalf has been desperate, accusatory, self-pitying and misleading. It has been a full-on blast of Bill Clinton's do-whatever's-necessary ethic of the sort we haven't seen since he wagged his finger at the country almost 10 years ago and denied having sex with Monica Lewinsky (in itself, an adolescent escapade that could have been straight out of "National Lampoon's White House").

During his presidency, Clinton was supposedly assailed by the forces of Republican extremism and of an out-of-control special prosecutor. Now, he's being attacked by the

forces of hope and change. Barack Obama has, by almost any standard, run a scrupulously high-minded campaign.

But that hasn't mattered. As far as Bill Clinton is concerned, Obama might as well be a member of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

Bill Clinton has distorted nearly everything he's commented on lately, whether it's Obama's record on the war or the Nevada caucus process. Clinton has usually delivered his anti-Obama broadsides in a state of red-faced near-rage, as though the Clinton campaign -- with all its formidable advantages going into this year -- has been offended against at every turn. What he is displaying is the face of aggrieved entitlement, and his trademark hypersensitivity about his own legacy -- both of which are informed by his overweening ego and inability to control it.

Newsweek reports that top Democrats have been pleading with Clinton to tone it down to keep from diminishing himself. Good luck. If the dignity of the office meant so little to him, why should the dignity of the former office restrain him? It is the

misfortune of the Democrats that the most talented politician of his generation happens to be a man-child.

Besides, Clinton has no incentive to stop his tantrum tour because it appears to be working. Strategically, there might not be much more the Clinton campaign can do to sell Hillary, but it certainly can tear down Obama. The Illinois senator has pledged to fight back against Bill, probably exactly what the Clinton campaign wants.

The uglier the race gets, the better for the Clintons. In Nevada, mysterious "robocalls" were made to voters that used Barack Obama's middle name, "Hussein," four times. It can't be long before the Clinton team uses Obama's relationship with a shady Chicago developer named Tony Rezko to try to make him seem as if he's running the most corrupt political operation since, well, the 1996 Clinton re-election campaign.

And if that doesn't work, there will be something else, as Bill Clinton tries to whine, kidney-punch and scold his way back to the White House, where he will have the run of the place, the happiest 16-year-old in the world. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

MOMENTS IN TIME

• **On Feb. 7, 1964**, the Beatles arrive in New York from London on their first visit to the United States. Two days later, an estimated 40 percent of the U.S. population tuned in to watch the band's appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

• **On Feb. 8, 1983**, gunmen steal the champion Irish race horse Shergar from a stud farm owned by the Aga Khan in County Kildare, Ireland. The 5-year-old thoroughbred stallion was worth \$13.5 million. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of more than \$2 million. Despite a highly publicized search by authorities, Shergar was never seen again and no ransom was paid.

• **On Feb. 9, 1973**, Max Yasgur, owner

of the 600-acre farm where the Woodstock music festival took place in August 1969, dies in Florida at age 53. More than 400,000 people attended the three-day festival in upstate New York. Concert organizers had expected only 50,000 to show up.

• **On Feb. 10, 1920**, "Kathleen Mavourneen," starring Theda Bara, provokes a riot when it opens in San Francisco. Rioters sacked the Sun Theater in protest of the film's portrayal of the Irish poor.

• **On Feb. 11, 1858**, in southern France, Marie-Bernarde Soubirous, a 14-year-old French peasant girl, claims to have seen the Virgin Mary. The apparitions, which

totalled 18 before the end of the year, occurred in a grotto of a rock promontory near Lourdes.

• **On Feb. 12, 1924**, the first network radio program to be sponsored by advertising debuts. The show, "The Eveready Hour," was sponsored by the National Carbon Company and broadcast in New York, Washington, D.C., and Providence, R.I.

• **On Feb. 13, 1989**, Leona Helmsley, nicknamed the "Queen of Mean" by the press, receives a four-year prison sentence and a \$7.1 million tax fraud fine in New York. For many, Helmsley became the object of loathing and disgust when she quipped that "only the little people pay taxes." ■