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# EDITORIAL

## Is the electorate disgusted?

BY ROGER E. HERNANDEZ

Barack Obama has been called the post-partisan presidential candidate, but Republicans have one, too, in John McCain.

It is difficult to picture either of them smearing an opponent or letting backers do the smear. If supporters outside their campaign tried the kind of swift-boating that blew up John Kerry's candidacy in 2004, can anybody imagine Obama or McCain failing to react quickly, loudly and insistently to demand the operation stop?

On the other hand, it's easy to imagine Hillary Clinton or Mitt Romney disassociating her- or himself from the attacks -- yet quietly not disapproving, either.

What else can be expected from Hillary and her husband, The Man Who Did Not Have Sex With That Woman? The couple has made it clear once again that the divisiveness of the 1990s cannot all be blamed on Republican slime merchants.

In a way, one can't help but admire the subtlety with which they brought up the race issue to hurt Obama, like when Bill Clinton dismissed Obama's South Carolina landslide by pointing out that Jesse Jackson

won the state in 1984 and 1988.

The triangulation is brilliant: Here was the "first black president" stating a straightforward fact of American political history, that a particular Democratic candidate of the 1980s won South Carolina twice, but never got the nomination -- and there he was, also, reminding us at the same time that it's a black thang, you see.

Not that Republican slime merchants have gone away, either. Just as brilliant as Clinton's Jesse-equals-Barack moment was Mike Huckabee's decision to withhold a particularly slimy television ad -- then releasing the spot at a press conference, thereby making sure it aired in news stories (for free!) and made a splash on YouTube.

As for Romney, no one is going to outpander the clip-art candidate. The former Massachusetts governor (was the entire state on drugs when it elected him?) doesn't just look like a model for those generic drawings of an office "boss" that illustrate a thousand cheesy brochures. He sounds like a cartoon, too.

In Florida, Romney decided the best strategy was to drone on about how John

McCain was not a true conservative because he works with Democrats too often, was endorsed by the liberal New York Times and considered being John Kerry's running mate while he, Mitt Romney, is the real heir to the Reagan legacy of family values, low taxes, small government ...

Yawn. Everybody knows the rest. Romney's unwillingness to speak in any language other than quarter-century-old Republican boilerplate leaves him as a candidate without a single interesting thought or original initiative.

But that, of course, is good enough for doctrinaire fanatics who listen to Rush Limbaugh, just like the discreet viciousness of Billary goes unnoticed by drinkers of Clintonite Kool-Aid.

Are there enough Democratic voters who think it's a good thing that Obama reaches out to Republicans in promising sweeping change? Are there enough Republican voters who admire McCain for risking his conservative credentials by standing up for sensible immigration policy?

Are there enough voters who have had enough? ■

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

## GUEST OPINION

### IRS to audit hospital contracts

BY ROY J. MEIDINGER

Fort Myers

Can the Internal Revenue Service fix the Health Care Industry in this country? WOW, this is a tremendous question, but the answer is an emphatic "yes".

In a recent directive issued by the IRS to all its auditors in the health industry, the auditors are to see if the secret contracts between the hospitals and the health insurance companies, protected under trade secret law and not subject to public scrutiny, are legally enforceable and if not for a legal purpose to put back on the books all the revenues written off as contract allowances.

If we use Lee Memorial Health System as a representative of most of the hospitals (81 percent) who have secret contracts with insurance companies the following information describes what the impact will be. In this country, on the private side of the business, the hospitals must charge all patients the same price, with price being legally described as the actual amount collected. The hospital does put the same charges on all its bills to its patients, which creates the

legal obligation on the patient to pay the full amount billed. The hospital as a matter of fact swears to the Federal and State governments it gives no discounts to any private pay patient. When we examine the annual reports for LMHS we notice on the private side, the largest expense item, of approximately \$400 million is called a contract adjustment. This contract adjustment is what the IRS is going to be investigating.

The IRS will see why LMHS is given to the insurance companies \$400 million a year. Keeping in mind a public facility cannot give out discriminatory discounts, especially to a third party payer. If the secret contracts are for an illegal purpose, such as brokering, and the health care provider splits the fees with the insurance companies for referring the policy holders to the hospital or limits competition in a region, then the revenue given to the insurance companies, in the form of a forgiveness of debt, is to be placed back on the books and treated as recognized income; and, because it is for an illegal purpose both the insurance companies and the hospitals, even tax exempt organizations, will have to pay taxes on these amounts.

If this comes about, the hospital will be forced to lower all its charges to a fair market value for its services and actually collect the same amount billed from the uninsured as from the insured patients. This will be a substantial saving for the 47 million uninsured patients. It will also have a tremendous effect on all the 255 million insured patients, both private and government insurance programs because the insurance companies will have to lower its premiums to its customers, mostly the employers who pay the premiums, due to the fact the premiums are based on the billed charges, not the actual amounts paid to the health care providers.

The only problem I see with what is taken place is the timing of this event. The auditors are going to be looking at the income tax returns filed in the year 2008 and the enforcement of collecting the taxes will be done in 2009. This means the necessary process is going to be started in one Presidency and be completed in another Presidency. Consequently, one President can say he started enforcing the statute, which has not been done in over 25 years and the next President will either be a hero or a goat for enforcing the statute. I genuinely think the people should insist this be done now, why should we have to wait another year or two to fix the health care system and enjoy the lower costs of health care services. ■

## MOMENTS IN TIME

- **On Feb. 14, 1842**, fans of Charles Dickens organize the Boz Ball, an elite party for the celebrated writer. (Dickens' earliest works had been published under the pseudonym Boz.) Only members of New York's aristocracy were invited, and tickets were priced at the then-outrageous sum of \$10.

- **On Feb. 15, 1965**, jazz singer and pianist Nat King Cole dies of lung cancer at age 46. In 1991, his daughter, singer Natalie Cole, released the album "Unforgettable With Love." Electronic recording and mixing technology allowed her to record duets with her father, using his old tracks.

- **On Feb. 16, 1959**, Fidel Castro is sworn in as prime minister of Cuba after

leading a guerrilla campaign that forced right-wing dictator Fulgencio Batista into exile. Castro replaced Miro Cardona as head of the country's new provisional government.

- **On Feb. 17, 1801**, after one tie vote in the Electoral College and 35 indecisive ballot votes in the House of Representatives, Vice President Thomas Jefferson is elected the third president of the United States. The confusing election exposed major problems in the presidential electoral process.

- **On Feb. 18, 1885**, Mark Twain publishes his famous — and famously controversial — novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." Twain (the pen name

of Samuel Clemens) first introduced Huck Finn as the best friend of Tom Sawyer, hero of his novel "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" (1876).

- **On Feb. 19, 1914**, Pittsburgh movie theaters are required to establish a seating section for unaccompanied women. Some women attending movies alone had complained of harassment.

- **On Feb. 20, 1725**, a posse of New Hampshire volunteers comes across a band of encamped Native Americans and takes 10 "scalps" in the first significant appropriation of this Native American practice. The posse received a bounty of 100 pounds per scalp from the Colonial authorities in Boston. ■