

Pushing buttons: An equal-opportunity electoral sleaze show

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

Senator John Kerry's anti-Vietnam war activities have been ignored by his Democratic opponents during his march to an all-but-certain Democratic nomination. Kerry was, after all, a Vietnam war hero before he became an antiwar activist. Democratic opponents did not want to remind antiwar voters that when a youthful Kerry testified before a 1972 Senate committee as head of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, he asked, "How do you ask a man to be the last to die for a mistake?"

Kerry's youthful bravado will not play as well with general election voters, which explains why the downside of Kerry's antiwar history has surfaced. "Hanoi Jane" is back, traveling up the media chain from the Internet to mainstream media. A caller to CSPAN radio said he was a Vietnam veteran but not one of Kerry's "band of brothers," because the tag team of Kerry and Hanoi Jane is anathema to many Vietnam veterans. While younger voters might ask, "Who is Hanoi Jane?," older veterans were asking: Does anyone have a copy of the photo of antiwar activist Jane Fonda (who visited Hanoi during the war) sitting close to Kerry at a rally? Yes, someone did, and its publication has stirred old memories in the voting bloc the Bush campaign wants to energize for the November election.

A few days after the Hanoi Jane story surfaced, rumors of a Kerry-related sex scandal began to rumble through the gossip network. The rumor, involving an unmarried young woman and Kerry, first appeared on the Drudge Report Web site, the site that first brought Monica Lewinsky to public attention. Several U.S. publications and newspapers in England and India reported the rumor, prompting Kerry to tell radio talk show host Don Imus that there was nothing to it. The next day the mainstream media dutifully reported the denial, but the denial is unlikely to quell the rumor.

There are many reasons to assume that the 2004 election campaign will be an equal-opportunity sleaze show. Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe charged President Bush with being AWOL from his National Guard assignment during the Vietnam war. On *Meet the Press* President Bush said that he had been honorably discharged from the Guard.

McAuliffe's slur against the president, however, was not nearly as unfair as the attack on Bush by author and film-maker Michael Moore at a Wesley Clark rally, where Moore branded the president a "deserter." Clark did not immediately repudiate the charge, as he should have done.

Host Tim Russert used valuable time in his *Meet the Press* interview to explore the Guard issue with President Bush. He did not, however, find time to ask Bush about the Israeli-Palestinian road map or Israel's plan to swap Gaza settlements for West Bank land, issues over which the president has considerable influence. He would no doubt have evaded the question, but it should have been asked.

Howard Dean learned the political cost of candor when he said he wanted to be "neutral" in dealing with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Dean's Democratic opponents immediately branded him as anti-Israel, a term no politician wants in his or her résumé. Media pundits described that statement as a gaffe, not because Dean was wrong in wanting to be fair to both sides, but because an important segment of his Democratic Party base is anything but neutral on that issue. Two other Dean observations soon followed, both immediately branded as gaffes: capturing Saddam does not make us safer, and Osama should get the same legal protection as any other accused mass murderer. So much for candor in foreign policy—and the integrity of the American justice system.

And so begins another presidential political campaign that will be short on substance and long on pushing emotional buttons. It does not have to be this way. Our nation has experienced political discussions of depth in the past. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas debated one another during their Illinois Senate campaign, holding the attention of their audiences on complex topics for more than three hours. Today, candidates raise obscene sums of money to speak to voters on TV for 30 seconds.

There is enough in Bush's foreign and domestic record to warrant strong criticism without wasting time on ancient history. What John Kerry did to oppose the war in Vietnam is not as relevant as what he did during 18 years in the Senate, and what

that record says about how he might perform as president. If there is trouble in his nonpolitical life, that is a matter he and his wife must resolve.

A few months ago I participated in a seminar with a group of nine young Palestinian Christian and Muslim leaders from the West Bank who came to Chicago as guests of North Park University. They came to study democracy and civil society. These young Palestinians live under occupation but hope some day to have a democracy of their own.

The good news about the ten days with these young men and women was that they gave those of us who took part an opportunity to discuss how the democratic process is designed to serve the common good. The bad news was that as we discussed presidential elections, it was clear to the visitors that our media-driven campaigns are far more about entertainment than they are about democracy. We Americans spoke about the ideals of democracy, but we could not disguise the fact that those ideals are not reflected in the way we conduct our elections.