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Analysis: McCain camp plays sexism card for Palin

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John McCain's campaign could be panicking or politicking with its claim that sexism lies beneath any questions about Sarah Palin's past.

They say they're not panicked that the Alaska governor's spot on the GOP ticket is secure so that leaves room for just one conclusion for now: McCain's political team is playing the gender card to appeal to women, and bashing the media to solidify support among conservatives.

Hours before Palin's high-stakes address to the nation, McCain was trying to inoculate his untested and embattled running mate against criticism.

"This is part of a very clever strategy to lead the Democrats into a trap that will end up with them dumping on Gov. Palin and paying a heavy price," said GOP consultant Rich Galen.

The chorus began at dawn Wednesday when senior adviser Steve Schmidt released a statement declaring that the campaign would no longer answer questions about its background check of Palin, a little-known governor whose every blemish is being paraded before Americans.

"The vetting controversy," Schmidt said, acknowledging that McCain has trouble on his hands, "is a faux media scandal designed to destroy the first female Republican nominee for the vice president of the United States who has never been a part of the old boys' network that has come to dominate the news establishment of this country."

It was a two-fer: Schmidt both tried to rally undecided female voters behind McCain's historic pick and prodded conservative Republicans to do what they do every election cycle blame the media.

Palin herself accused the media of judging her unqualified simply because she's not a member of the Washington elite. "But here's a little news flash for all those reporters and commentators: I'm not going to Washington to seek their good opinion," she said in remarks prepared for delivery Wednesday night. "I'm going to Washington to serve the people of this country."

And so, Schmidt suggested, the campaign won't explain why Palin waited until last week to tell the McCain team that her unmarried 17-year-old daughter is five months pregnant.

Or why Palin didn't submit to a face-to-face interview with the head of McCain's search team until a few days before her announcement.

Or why she's accused of improperly ordering the firing of the former public safety commissioner.

Or why she supported the infamous "Bridge to Nowhere" and other pork-barrel projects before telling the nation on Saturday that she was against them.

"This nonsense," Schmidt said, "is over."

Not likely.

Palin is seeking to be a heartbeat away from the presidency. The media views its job as scrutinizing her background, helping voters determine her readiness to serve and raising questions about the decision-

making process of the man who chose her a man, John McCain, who tells voters he has the experience and judgment to serve as president.

The scrutiny will continue, as it always does, and the betting among leading Republicans is that Palin survives. None of the revelations so far rise to the level of disqualifying. And, while she has served less than a term as governor, Democratic Sen. Barack Obama is the living embodiment of the fact that this election is less about experience than it is about change. Voters want a fresh approach, if not a fresh face, in Washington.

Inside the Republican Party, Palin delivers for McCain on two counts.

First, he needs to peel away a fraction of the independent-minded female vote trending toward Obama. Seizing on the so-called vetting controversy, McCain's campaign made a shrewd appeal to women by casting Palin as a victim of familiar circumstances.

"How do we balance our career, in her case a political career, with that of motherhood and continue to have a very fine family?" asked former U.S. Treasurer Rosario Marin, one of dozens of women dispatched to media outlets by the McCain campaign.

Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani toted his feminist talking points around to no fewer than five morning TV interviews.

"The scrutiny you are giving her is so darn unfair. It is really indecent," he told MSNBC's morning crew. "She is being asked questions like, can you, as a mother ... be vice president? Whoever asked a man?"

And so he went, from one TV camera to the next.

CBS: "Where are the feminists?"

ABC: "Give the woman a chance ..."

Fox News: "I'm at the point of (being) really angry."

And that's the point. McCain wants conservative voters, many of whom were lukewarm toward his candidacy, whipped into high dudgeon in defense of Palin, angry at the media and the unnamed liberal elites who are denounced by most every convention speaker.

Unfortunately for Democrats, they can't protest too much over McCain's use of the gender card not after the race between Obama and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton stirred sex and racial tensions.

It was regrettable that Democrats backing a black man and white woman "say things that veer off into the personal," Clinton said at the time. "We ought to keep this on issues."

Not likely.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for more than 20 years.

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