

COMPARE AND CONTRAST: TWO ALLEGATIONS OF CAMPAIGN VIOLENCE

✘ I spent a good chunk of the day chasing down and then not reporting this story (which was first noted here) and related details about the McCain campaign's involvement in pushing Ashley Todd's story. But after chasing the story all day, I think we'd all be better off trying to calm tensions, rather than attacking the McCain campaign (yet) for pushing this story.

First, let's look carefully at what we know the McCain campaign did (and let me make clear—I'm not ruling out the possibility that they did more than this, I'm just dealing with what we currently have evidence of). First, when called by a local TV station following up on the Drudge story, the campaign told the TV station that the attacker had said, "I'm going to teach you a lesson," and that the letter "B" stood for Barack. In addition, the campaign told the TV station that Palin had called Todd. Note—the station called the campaign, not vice versa.

John Verrilli, the news director for KDKA in Pittsburgh, told TPM Election Central that McCain's Pennsylvania campaign communications director gave one of his reporters a detailed version of the attack that included a claim that the alleged attacker said, "You're with the McCain campaign? I'm going to teach you a lesson."

Verrilli also told TPM that the McCain spokesperson had claimed that the "B" stood for Barack. According to Verrilli, the spokesperson also told KDKA that Sarah Palin had called the victim of the alleged attack, who has since admitted the story was a hoax.

The KDKA reporter had called McCain's campaign office for details after seeing the story – sans details – teased on Drudge. [my emphasis]

But let's be clear: the campaign didn't come up with the claim that the assailant wanted to "teach her a lesson." Todd did. I found numerous examples—like this one—that attribute precisely those words to the police, not the campaign, describing Todd's allegations.

"He continued to kick and punch her repeatedly and said he would teach her a lesson for supporting John McCain," **said police Chief Nate Harper.** [my emphasis]

The cops were reporting that line contemporaneously with the rest of the allegations (this story appears to come from the first batch of story reported and printed in the 4PM to 6PM range). So as far as the "teach her a lesson" comment, the campaign was just responding to local press inquiries with the same story the cops were telling to the press at roughly the same time. (I'm less sure whether the campaign interpreted the "B" as meaning Barack or not, because discussions of that have more variance in stories sources to the police.) That's not to say the cops **should** have been telling that story, but they were.

Now, as for the fact that Palin called Todd (other reports indicated that McCain called her too), what do you think Obama would have done, if he believed that one of his campaign volunteers had gotten hurt because of an affiliation with the campaign? In fact, we don't need to speculate, we can look at what he did do, in the case of Nancy Takehara, who alleged that someone beat her up while canvassing.

Takehara was encouraged when she had a message waiting at home from the candidate she is fighting for. Takehara called back and she and Senator Obama

talked one-on-one. Takehara said, "Senator Obama understood... it was wonderful. It made me feel wonderful. It made me feel connected to this government again."

At a time when the facts were still unclear about the incident as it pertained to Takehara, before Takehara had even returned home from the canvass, Obama responded to news that one of his campaign staffers was assaulted by calling her. Just as McCain and Palin called Todd.

And for the record, while Takehara's assailant admits he pulled her hair, there is still disagreement about precisely what happened. Oh—and as with Ashley Todd's fake story, Takehara did not seek medical care.

On Saturday night in a telephone interview with WISN television, Takehara said "he (Goetsch) grabbed me by the back of the neck. I thought he was going to rip my hair out of my head. He was pounding on my head and screaming."

Goetsch said he did pull the woman's hair, but denies hitting or slapping her. Takehara did not seek medical attention at the scene of the incident, Caledonia police said in a Saturday press release.

The big difference, of course, is that Obama's volunteer's claim happened to be at least partly true, whereas McCain's volunteer was making it up. But until we have evidence—which we don't yet have—that McCain had reason to doubt Todd's story but pushed it anyway, then I don't really fault him for calling her. Obama would do the same thing.

A quick note about whether the McCain campaign should have known that Todd's story was bogus. In the afternoon, the campaign's statement was,

We're shaken up by this. It's sick and

disgusting.

But then, before midnight last night, the McCain campaign spokesperson—the same one who had been gabbing to the press earlier in the day—got a lot more circumspect (Note, the police source in this story said she didn't know what the "B" stood for, though as I said, that account varies).

McCain spokesman Peter Feldman confirmed that the woman is a campaign volunteer but declined to comment further.

That's not definitive—but it suggests between six PM and midnight last night—at about the time the police first started publicly commenting about the inconsistencies in Todd's story—the McCain campaign reeled in its earlier boisterousness about those claims. Perhaps in the interim they realized she had no black eyes in real life while in Drudge's picture she did; perhaps the police just warned them of their concerns. But the McCain campaign appears to have reacted to accumulating evidence that Todd was full of shit.

Now, the Obama campaign did something in the immediate aftermath of the Takehara incident that the McCain campaign didn't do.

The Obama campaign did not want to comment on the incident at this time.

They waited until the following day to give a statement, and they didn't make any claims about what had had happened to Takehara.

"Last night's unfortunate incident in Caledonia was isolated and extremely rare, and we are grateful our volunteer is doing well," said Phil Walczak, Wisconsin communications director for Obama For America. "Thousands of Wisconsinites welcome our canvassers at the doors each and every day and whether

or not they support Barack Obama. There is an overwhelming desire across the state to have a dialogue about how to bring our country forward.”

No Drama Obama.

Mind you, some bloggers have pushed Takehara’s story, just as even more of us pushed the dead baby bear cub story that may have been less incendiary than it first appeared. But the campaign hasn’t—and particularly hasn’t made claims about the facts of either of those incidents. That said, I’m not sure most campaigns would have either the self-restraint or the messaging discipline not to respond to a local press inquiry with the facts as they were currently known.

I raised what we lefty bloggers have done with two other stories to point out that there are surrogates on the right that the campaign can’t be expected to control. Who sent the pictures of Ashley Todd to Drudge? As far as we know, the state-level campaign didn’t send anything to the local press; they either selectively sent it to Drudge and (potentially) some other righty bloggers—though both Michelle Malkin and Ace of Spades were skeptical of the story. Or, just as likely, someone else sent the photo to Drudge. **We don’t know** who took Ashley Todd’s fictional story and pushed it out to Drudge, which is how it got picked up by the rest of the media.

But thus far, at least, we have as much reason to believe it was the College Republicans—ratfuckers way out of their depth—or Ashley Todd herself who sent out the photo, as we have reason to believe the McCain campaign pushed it.

Don’t get me wrong—what Ashley Todd did was heinous, and I suspect I will follow-up on what it means that some were claiming hers was the new face of the Republican party.

But as I researched this all day, I found myself to be less and less outraged about the McCain

campaign's response to this specifically and increasingly outraged over McCain's response to John Lewis' rebuke of McCain's campaign tactics. As a reminder, Lewis said,

As one who was a victim of violence and hate during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, I am deeply disturbed by the negative tone of the McCain-Palin campaign. What I am seeing reminds me too much of another destructive period in American history. Sen. McCain and Gov. Palin are sowing the seeds of hatred and division, and there is no need for this hostility in our political discourse.

During another period, in the not too distant past, there was a governor of the state of Alabama named George Wallace who also became a presidential candidate. George Wallace never threw a bomb. He never fired a gun, **but he created the climate and the conditions that encouraged vicious attacks against innocent Americans who were simply trying to exercise their constitutional rights.** Because of this atmosphere of hate, four little girls were killed on Sunday morning when a church was bombed in Birmingham, Alabama.

As public figures with the power to influence and persuade, Sen. McCain and Gov. Palin are playing with fire, and if they are not careful, that fire will consume us all. They are playing a very dangerous game that disregards the value of the political process and cheapens our entire democracy. We can do better. The American people deserve better.

McCain, of course, lashed out at Lewis (and Obama) in response, ignoring his larger message about conditions that encourage things like Ashley Todd's race-baiting.

You see, as I researched this today, and concluded that—thus far—we have no evidence yet the McCain campaign did anything more than irresponsibly (but not surprisingly) push details it believed to be true, the part of Lewis' statement that talked about the "conditions that encourage vicious attacks" resonated more and more. As Scarecrow reminded me with this link today, Lewis' own history, and that of George Wallace, is a lot more ambivalent and ultimately extended far beyond Wallace's own violence. At this point, all of us have been thrust into a climate that encourages vicious attacks—and guarantees that vicious race-baiters like Ashley Todd will be guaranteed her 15 minutes of infamy.

McCain's campaign shouldn't have confirmed any details of the attack. McCain himself should have made a strong statement condemning Todd's actions (which he has yet to do). But more importantly, it all goes back to John Lewis' more important point—that we have to get beyond the climate that fosters this kind of behavior. McCain's refusal to take real steps to do so remains his biggest error here.