

Dishing the dirt

Some are stooping low to target Teresa Heinz Kerry

One of the dirty political tricks of the age is the surrogate attack on opponents from the fringes, allowing a candidate to reap the benefit while denying the responsibility.

Both Democratic and Republican organizations play this cheap-shot game, but the Republicans seem to be more effective at it, especially when the subject is first ladies, prospective or established.

Case in point: Hillary Clinton, who was excoriated by the right wing in ways that Barbara Bush and Laura Bush never had to face. One could fairly argue that the Republican first ladies are noncontroversial, traditional women who would be hard to link to any scandal, whereas Mrs. Clinton has always been political in her own right and fair game for criticism.

But to our knowledge nobody ever seriously tried to besmirch the good names of the Republican first ladies, while Mrs. Clinton was gleefully singled out for attacks that were so rabid as to be toxic.

Now the right-wing sleaze merchants are gearing up to go after Teresa Heinz Kerry. This budding campaign is laughable to anyone in the Pittsburgh area who is familiar with the stellar reputation of the Heinz legacy, but peddlers of dirt cater to gullible partisans with no sense of decency or shame.

As Post-Gazette writer Dennis Roddy detailed in a story last Sunday, one of the dirt-slinging outfits is the Washington-based Capital Research Center. Mrs. Kerry is in the business of charitable giving as head of

the Howard Heinz Endowment and a board member of the Vira Heinz Foundation. In any other context, this would be viewed as a highly worthy enterprise, but a report commissioned by the center managed to cast her work as sinister.

The report said that Heinz Foundation money was going to support a San Francisco charity, The Tides Foundation and its affiliate the Tides Center, which in turn supported liberal groups that the center thinks are radical. The report's authors can't say for sure how Heinz money — \$4 million over a seven-year period — was spent, but smears don't have to be precise. A spokesman for the Heinz Foundation said the money went specifically to environmental charities based in Western Pennsylvania, none of them radical.

What we have here is a thin reed, but not so thin that it couldn't be woven into a bucket to carry slop. It artfully touches upon two right-wing obsessions — conspiracies everywhere and liberals under every bed.

If Sen. John Heinz were still alive and Teresa Heinz were still his wife, you wouldn't hear a peep about this. If as a widow she had simply stayed home, played bridge and counted her money, the silence would also be deafening. This attack bristles with hostility to the idea that women can have their own lives.

In the end, the campaign to hurt Teresa Heinz Kerry will say more about the people who perpetrate it than the woman who has the respect and admiration of the Western Pennsylvania residents who know her best.