

DEBATE PREP

Let's review the events of the last week or so for the McCain team. On Thursday, McCain precipitously withdrew from MI—the MI GOP seemed to have no warning, and his offices were already packing up and closing on Saturday. McCain then spent the weekend sequestered with his advisors in Sedona (though he did take a break on Saturday for a Happy Meal). He's got an event in NM today (a state where Obama leads polling by greater margins than he does in MI), but the weekend retreat was notable for the way it served not just as time to retool the campaign (and, desperately, to try to count to 270) but also to prep for the debate on Tuesday. Indeed, the campaign seems to be tying their new campaign roll-out to Tuesday's debate.

Asked at a Colorado town hall, "When are you going to take the gloves off?" the candidate grinned and replied, "How about Tuesday night?"

[snip]

A senior aide said the campaign will wait until after Tuesday's debate to decide how and when to release new commercials, adding that McCain and his surrogates will continue to cast Obama as a big spender, a high taxer and someone who talks about working across the aisle but doesn't deliver.

Now, that's not entirely true—that the campaign would wait until Tuesday to roll out its new recycled smears. Sarah Palin's been accusing Obama of palling around with terrorists since Saturday.

But it does set up a remarkable dynamic for tomorrow's debate. After losing two debates in a row, the McCain team seems to believe it can use the next debate as an opportunity relaunch its entire campaign.

Obviously, this is the debate format McCain prefers.

Second presidential debate: all topics in town meeting format, moderated by Tom Brokaw

Tuesday, October 7, Belmont University, Nashville, TN

-Two-minute answers, followed by one-minute discussion for each question.

Or should I say preferred. McCain won New Hampshire by doing about a million town halls; and he used them a lot early in the summer. But around mid-summer (when Steve Schmidt took over the campaign, I think), McCain started vetting the attendees of these town halls. And as the WSJ points out, he has really cut back the number of town halls he is doing. In other words, McCain used to like the unscripted format of town halls, but has grown sour on them.

I'm guessing the McCain team crafted their attempt to go negative around this town hall believing they could get participants to pick up the themes they're emphasizing in their ads: Rezko, Ayers, and (in 527 ads, though not directly) Wright. Perhaps they believed they could change the subject by seeding questions for tomorrow and then pointing back at the town hall to claim that voters were obsessed with smears of Obama.

As if could change the concerns of Americans who were losing their jobs and homes just by hoping those concerns would go away. At a time when the market has fallen below 10,000. Yup.

And how stupid of them, then, to announce they were planning on doing so. Not only could and has the Obama campaign pointed out that McCain's got his own troubling associations: Gramm, Singlaub, and Liddy, for example—to say nothing of Sarah's pastor problem and her own ties to separtist terrorists.

But it was a giant invitation for the Obama

campaign to go where they haven't gone (but they've been preparing to go) yet: to Keating. (The Obama campaign will release a documentary at noon on Keating, too.)

In other words, the McCain team invited the Obama team to point out that John McCain has a history of corruption that leads to the kind of crises we're undergoing. Just in time for that history to become a topic in tomorrow's debate.