

CAMPAIGN JOURNAL

Rope-a-Dope

by Ryan Lizza

When John Kerry was a swift-boat commander in Vietnam, his job was to steer his small, noisy vessel down the Mekong Delta in an attempt to draw enemy fire. As *The Boston Globe* explained in its excellent series about the candidate last June, “Kerry’s mission was to wait until hidden Vietcong guerrillas started shooting, then order his men to return fire.” Not surprisingly, swift-boat crewmembers were frequently shot. The commander of these operations once estimated that his men had a 75 percent chance of being killed or wounded. Kerry himself was injured three times.

Kerry’s presidential campaign strategy echoes his days on that swift boat: He has spent the last eight weeks drawing enemy fire and taking hits. Consider the numbers: The Bush campaign has raised \$184 million and spent \$100 million of it, half of that on TV ads. “It’s the most expensive and concentrated political advertising campaign we’ve ever seen in American politics,” says Tony Corrado, a campaign finance expert at the Brookings Institution. Kerry stumbled out of his primary victory and into President Bush’s sights, as vulnerable as he was in his flimsy boat taking incoming from the Vietcong. He had little money, and his campaign wasn’t yet staffed for the general election.

Worse, the little money Kerry did have, or the money spent on his behalf by so-called 527s, did not fund what would have been the most effective commercials—those making an affirmative case for him. “Attack ads against Kerry and positive ads from Kerry should be the most powerful ads,” says Mandy Grunwald, who made Bill Clinton’s spots in 1992, “because Bush’s positive case is known and the case against him is known.” Yet the 527s have spent at least \$28 million in the last two months on ads attacking Bush. And, instead of a biographical ad or positive spot in which the senator articulates his plans for the country, the gist of the Kerry campaign’s advertising has been to defend him from Bush’s tax-raising charge. “They are basically doing defense on taxes so far,” says a top Democratic strategist.

All of which has prompted concern among Democratic strategists outside the Kerry campaign. Some blame the strained relationship between Kerry’s ad-makers that led to the recent departure of former adman Jim Margolis. Others blame the memory of the last Massachusetts Democrat to win his party’s nomination. “One theory is that the Kerry people are obsessed with [Michael] Dukakis,” says the strategist. “They are fighting the last war—rapid response above all else.”

But, whatever the explanation, the Kerry strategy may not be so bizarre. Indeed, after absorbing the full brunt of Bush’s most concentrated attack for eight weeks, the race is essentially tied. And that is before Kerry has really started to return his fire. When I asked one of Kerry’s most influential advisers about the criticism of the campaign’s decision to lay low through March and April, he sharply dismissed the complaints and pointed out that just because Kerry has been almost invisible over the last eight weeks doesn’t mean the campaign hasn’t been doing anything. He pointed to the Iowa caucuses, where the campaign quietly laid the groundwork for victory even as the press dismissed Kerry as a goner and hinted at a similar effort this time around. “I’m not paying attention to you guys anymore,” he said.

So what has Kerry been doing in the weeks since clinching the nomination? Raising money—more money than any presidential candidate, Democrat or Republican, has ever raised in a single quarter. While Bush burned through over \$50 million in the last two months, almost one-third of the total he has raised, Kerry banked \$55 million.

The Bush strategy was to use the ad blitz to put the race away by the end of April. But Kerry's money has exposed several flaws in the Bush campaign's assumptions about the race. First of all, the White House originally assumed that a bloody Democratic primary would force the eventual nominee to spend so much money that he would be hemmed in by restrictive spending caps that come with taking federal dollars. But, following Howard Dean's lead, Kerry opted out of that system and its rules for the primaries.

More important, the White House assumed the Democratic nominee would simply have no money to spend. But, within 48 hours of Super Tuesday, March 2, Kerry raised \$4.6 million online. The money never stopped pouring in. Kerry raised \$42.8 million in March alone, fueled by 200,000 individual online donations. "That allowed us to bridge the gap as we got into the traditional fund-raising," says Michael Meehan, a senior Kerry aide. On March 29, Kerry pivoted to wealthier donors and embarked on a monthlong fund-raising tour to hit up \$2,000-check-writers in 20 cities. As Tad Devine, a senior Kerry strategist, pointed out in an April 21 call with reporters, Al Gore had just \$9 million to spend from Super Tuesday to the convention. John Kerry will have about \$100 million.

But, instead of spending this money as it came in, the Kerry campaign made a decision to absorb Bush's blows and to rely on the effects of the 527s and the negative news from Richard Clarke, Iraq, and the 9/11 Commission. This decision may be remembered as the most brilliant move of the campaign or the one that cost Kerry the presidency. It is a large-scale version of rope-a-dope—allow your opponent to unload with his most powerful punches as you hunker down and bide your time, waiting to unload in the next round, once the other guy has spent himself. If it works, it will partly be because Bush was hit with a blizzard of bad news that overlapped precisely with his anti-Kerry advertising schedule. "[Bob] Shrum was lucky, not good," says one Democratic strategist, speaking of Kerry's senior adviser. "I wouldn't want to plan my presidential election strategy around the machinations of some wacko Iraqi cleric and the Simon and Schuster publication schedule, but those are the only things keeping this 'don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes' gambit plausible."

Still, the implications of Kerry's decision to sit on his fund-raising haul are profound. Most important, Bush's greatest mechanical advantage—his war chest—is no longer a top concern for Kerry. On March 1, Kerry had \$2.4 million in the bank and Bush had \$110 million. By the end of April, a rough educated guess, based on how both candidates are raising and spending money, would put Kerry's cash on hand at about \$60 million and Bush's at about \$75 million. But Bush may actually be at a disadvantage. First of all, Kerry will continue to be supplemented by the millions of dollars the 527s will still be spending for him. And Bush's money has to last a month longer than Kerry's. Once each candidate is officially nominated at his respective convention, he can no longer use the money he has been raising for the last year. Bush and Kerry plan on abiding by the federal financing rules and will run their general election campaigns with the \$75 million check the government will hand over on the fourth night of each convention. Kerry gets his check on July 29. But, because Bush scheduled the Republican Convention in late August and early September, partly to push it closer to the third anniversary of September 11, the president doesn't get his money until September 2. It is conceivable that, in the three months before the Democratic Convention in Boston, Kerry will spend *more* on advertising than Bush. "In May, June, and July, Kerry should be spending about \$4.4 million a week," says a Democratic strategist. "That's what Bush is spending now. And that doesn't include the outside groups." Compounding the problem for Bush is the fact that during the Olympics, in August, advertising prices across the TV spectrum will rise dramatically. (The flip side of this, of course, is that Bush will have just two months to spend his \$75 million after the convention, while Kerry will have to stretch the same amount over three months.)

On Wednesday, Kerry finally began his counterattack and released two new ads. One shows him standing in a formal living room in front of an American flag, speaking directly into the camera while patriotic music plays softly. He talks about his “clear national priorities for America,” security, jobs, health care, and education. In a second, similar ad, he talks about Iraq. Aides say the ads are mostly an attempt to make Kerry look “presidential,” which Mike Donilon, the partner in Shrum’s firm who made the ads, says “is typically a very high hurdle for challengers to get over.” The Bush campaign immediately responded with its toughest spot of the campaign, an ad called “Doublespeak” that features quotes from biting newspaper editorials criticizing Kerry. The basic strategies are simple and unlikely to change for a long time. Bush knows he is vulnerable to defeat, so he must disqualify Kerry as an acceptable alternative to the majority of voters who want a change. Kerry must finally define himself as a potential president for those same voters.

The old conventional wisdom was that all this had to be done in the early spring. Kerry has bet his campaign on the fact that it can be done this summer. “We made a decision to parry,” says Devine, speaking of Kerry’s March and April lull, “and now we have begun our thrust.” Of course, it could be too late.