

Politics as brainwashing

By Jim Nowlan

Even though 'tis the holiday season, the 2012 presidential season has also begun in earnest, with the Iowa caucuses scheduled for January 3. Expect a year-long political tussle in which both major parties engage in efforts to brainwash voters into believing their opponents are lower forms of life than pond scum.

We need a code of ethics among campaign consultants, just many occupations have such codes. Those that won't adhere to the code—as well as their candidates—should be publicly ostracized.

Brainwashing works. We saw it in 2006 when then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich spent \$20+ million to run 23,000 campaign TV spots that branded his eminently respectable and accomplished opponent Judy Baar Topinka as an unsavory nincompoop, literally destroying her persona for a short period.

Voters bought into the relentless negative ads, which Judy lacked the money to combat. As a result, we overwhelmingly re-elected a person who has subsequently been convicted and removed by the state legislature and then convicted by a federal court jury.

The effects of brainwashing of some American soldiers by Chinese Communists during the Korean War were apparently short-lived. So it has been with Illinois voters, who elected Judy Baar Topinka to state office in 2010 over a decent opponent.

In the late 1970s and early '80s I managed campaigns for U.S. Senate and presidential candidates. Prior to that period, negative campaigning generally didn't work,

and often boomeranged against the candidate who attacked his opponent, according to the campaign consultants we employed at the time. But by the 1980s, voters were becoming so skeptical, even cynical about politics that they began believing negative, often distorted ads.

The closest I came to negative campaigning was during the successful 1978 re-election campaign of U.S. Senator Charles Percy, when I reproduced as a full-page ad in all the state's daily newspapers a column by Mike Royko that lambasted our opponent. Because Royko was well-known and credible, the ad apparently had significant impact.

But never did we, or our opponent in that race, stoop to the kinds of misleading distortions and manipulations, which we are beginning to see, of the words of opposing presidential candidates.

According to the New York Times, a recent Romney commercial included footage of President Obama saying, "If we keep talking about the economy, we're going to lose." Apparently Obama was describing how his 2008 opponent John McCain assessed his own situation. So the clip had the opposite meaning of that in the Romney commercial.

The Democrats are apparently no better, as last month the head of the Democratic National Committee tried to scare older voters by charging that Romney wanted to privatize Social Security, when in fact he considers that a dangerous idea.

Politics is sometimes described as football without the muscles, so the combatants in today's political games would probably have cheered Detroit Lions' Ndamukong Suh's recent violent stomping of an opposing player when he was down.

At least Suh was suspended for several games; there are no sanctions for campaign consultants who beat up on their opponents after the whistle has blown.

The money for TV ads in this presidential campaign is estimated by a media company to be about \$3 billion. That is enough for a million TV spots at \$3,000 per, most of which will be negative attacks that seek to destroy public trust and confidence in the opponent. Enough money to curdle the public's attitude about the most respectable of candidates.

The American Association of Advertising Agencies has a Code of Ethics. The code states that its adherents will not knowingly create advertising that contains "false or misleading statements or exaggerations" or "claims insufficiently supported or that distort the true meaning. . . .of statements." The code goes on to talk about how comparative ads, which most campaign ads are, should be governed by the "same standards of truthfulness, claim substantiation, tastefulness that apply to other types of advertising."

Wouldn't adherence to that code be refreshing! Then we could deal in persuasion rather than brainwashing. I think journalists should carry the code around with them and ask candidates, their campaign consultants, and the political "super committees" if they subscribe to the code of the advertising profession, which is what politics is all about anyway.