

Kiser: Think the current presidential election is the dirtiest campaign of all time. Think again. In today's episode of the Thought Provoking podcast, we'll hear about elections in history where opponents' mothers were called prostitutes, wives died from the strain of the negative campaign, and even Abraham Lincoln got called some brutal names. And we'll hear about the last openly racist campaign in the US. We'll even hear about how a claim of Russian interference is not a new phenomenon. Then we'll wrap it all up by talking about how recent campaigns compare. This is Shelly Kiser and to inform us about all of this and more, joining me today is Dr. Kerwin Swint. Kerwin is director of the School of Government and International Affairs and professor of political science here in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University. And thank you for being with us today, Kerwin.

Dr. Swint: Glad to be here. My pleasure.

Kiser: I just read your book. It's called *Mudslingers: The Top 25 Negative Political Campaigns of All Time*. And you know I was really surprised by number two, because we often think of negative campaigning as being kind of a recent phenomenon but the number two dirtiest campaign in your book is the Andrew Jackson versus John Quincy Adams presidential election, way back in 1828. So, has dirty campaigning really been going on for that long?

Dr. Swint: I tell you, dirty campaigning, negative campaigning, mudslinging is as old as the United States. From the very first political campaign in 1796, they started going at each other. Actually, there were two really bad ones—1824 and 1828. That is a campaign that a lot of people would put at the very top of their list. In fact, a lot of historians, when you ask them, what's the worst campaign ever? A lot of times they'll say that 1828 campaign.

Kiser: So, what made it so bad? What did Jackson and Adams do to each other?

Dr. Swint: There was such personal animosity. And it really grew out of the 1824 election, which came to be called the corrupt bargain, when John Quincy Adams and others stole the election. They conspired to steal the election from Andrew Jackson in the Electoral College. That just worsened the rivalries and the bitterness and the vitriol. In 1828, particularly, Adams' forces called Andrew Jackson every name in the book publicly. They published leaflets, handbills and newspapers that called him a murderer. They talked about his mother being a prostitute brought over by British troops. Really, really dirty. It's one of those things that is historically famous.

Kiser: So how did they steal the election, as you just mentioned? How did that happen and what was involved?

Dr. Swint: There was a deal made by the Adams' campaign and the voters in the Electoral College to change votes. They made a deal behind the scenes that sealed the deal for Adams and Jackson, and the Jacksonian forces felt really burned. A little bit like Bernie Sanders in 2016 when the Democratic National Committee seemed to conspire against him. It was sort of that same kind of thing.

Kiser: Interesting. I know some of the negativity between them was really about two different worldviews, right? One was the rugged frontiersman. One was political aristocracy. Did that cause problems, also?

Dr. Swint: It was a big part of the rivalry. It was a clash of civilizations. Adams represented the political aristocracy, the landowners, the elites business-owning class, whereas Jackson was more of a populist. He was more of a prairie politician. He represented what he called the common man, the common person. And he thought that there should not be this permanent political class, but that government service should be volunteer, and there should be a rotation in place. He would very much be in favor of what we call term limits.

Kiser: Were their term limits back then?

Dr. Swint: No, not at all. But there was more of an expectation, though, at that time, that you go and serve for a few years and then you go back home. That was more the custom than it has been in the 20th and 21st century.

Kiser: They were also pretty rough on Jackson's wife, right?

Dr. Swint: Yeah, they called her a bigamist, because she had been previously married, and there was some dispute over whether the divorce decree was valid or not or whether it was done after the fact, after her second marriage. Historians believe that it was done appropriately. But the Adams' forces took that as an opportunity to attack and smear the poor guy's wife.

Kiser: That must have been brutal for her.

Dr. Swint: It actually drove her to the grave.

Kiser: Wow!

Dr. Swint: She died after the election of 1828 before Jackson was inaugurated. She had a heart condition, and she was sick during the campaign. Of course, Jackson always attributed it to the stress and the heartbreak of all these attacks against her. and he wore black armband at his inauguration.

Kiser: Wow! So somebody even died it was so nasty.

Dr. Swint: Yes, there was an actual body count.

Kiser: That's brutal. One thing that really fascinated me was an element of negativity involved the Russians. That made me think about today. It popped back in the 1800s and it's still popping up today. They were saying something about Jackson, doing something for the Tsar?

Dr. Swint: Yeah, they threw everything they could think of into the anti-Jackson pot. He was supposed to be making these behind the scenes deals with the tsar of Russia. It does remind us of today.

Kiser: Right?

One of the giants of American history, Abraham Lincoln involved in a dirty campaign where they were certain he would lose? Say it isn't so! Find out about that campaign and how a battle in Georgia led to his victory. Back in just a minute.

This is Shelly Kiser. I'm the host of the Thought Provoking podcast, and also communications manager for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, just outside Atlanta, Kennesaw State is the third largest university in the state, and a Carnegie designated R2 doctoral research institution, placing it among an elite group of only 6% of U.S. colleges

and universities with either an R1 or an R2 status. It's also one of the 50 largest public institutions in the country. The College of Humanities and Social Sciences is the largest college at KSU with over 400 faculty members and over 7000 students. It houses 11 departments and schools, with more than 80 programs of study. Our show features the amazing researchers in our college, and their amazing and thought-provoking research.

So, another surprising entry for me was number four, Abraham Lincoln versus George McClellan in 1864. You don't think of anything contentious when you think of Abraham Lincoln. We think of him as this wonderful figure in American history. What made this election so contentious?

Dr. Swint: It's amazing. You're right that we think of everything associated with Abraham Lincoln as being majestic and wonderful and great. And most of it was, but up until September of 1864 he was having a hard time. He was projected to lose in 1864, mainly because of the split during the Civil War and because the war wasn't going very well early in 1864. So, the democrats were running all these different kinds of smear campaigns against Lincoln. There were a ton of anti-Lincoln editorials and cartoons. They called him every name in the book from an ape to a baboon to a monster. And so he was in pretty bad shape. What really turned it around for Lincoln was well, for one thing, that the Democrats really couldn't get their act together behind a really effective candidate. They finally settled for general McClellan, who is one of the first main commanders of the U.S. Army during the Civil War. He was very anti-Lincoln. But what really turned it around was the Battle of Atlanta, which we're really familiar with here in Georgia. The Georgia campaign broke the back of the Confederacy later in 1864. That enabled Lincoln and his supporters to maintain that things were on track, they were coming back, and things were going to be great. That enabled him to really cruise to victory and win that election.

Kiser: So, the war hurt him first and then helped him towards the end. It was all based on that. As I said, you think of Abraham Lincoln as this wonderful figure in history, and they called him ignoramus Abe, a third-rate backwoods lawyer, and a big joke. It seems shocking to us today.

Dr. Swint: Politics is politics and every election, really throughout our history, has featured name-calling and these personal attacks and these really bad smears. Because winning is everything.

Kiser: Yeah. And they even were going to have somebody run against the president, from their own party. Salmon Chase, wasn't that who was going to run against him?

Dr. Swint: Yeah, there were actually a couple of possible stand-ins because things were going so bad that the republicans were getting really nervous about Lincoln's chances. The Republican Party had divisions too, and there were several different parts of the party who said, we need to do something because Lincoln's going to lose. They were scrambling around trying to find some kind of alternative.

Kiser: I also thought it was interesting that they came up with a really brutal claim that he had someone singing to him on the battlefield.

Dr. Swint: Yeah, that was taken wildly out of context. After, I think, the Battle of Gettysburg, when all the bodies were laying around, the Democrat campaign said that Lincoln asked the driver to sing a cheery song as they drove through looking at the bodies. It was something Lincoln had said that day that was just taken out of context. It was basically a lie. It made him sound like he was being heartless and cold.

Kiser: Yeah, that makes him sound brutal.

Dr. Swint: It's hard to believe that politicians would tell a lie.

Kiser, Oh, shocking, to be sure. There was even a racial component, right, to the election?

Dr. Swing: Right. The Civil War brought up tons of charges and countercharges about not only Lincoln, but everybody involved in 1864. There were charges of Lincoln supporting the bringing of mullatos into the country, having them populate part of the North, as well as part of the South. Just some really vile charges that were meant to stir up racial animosity. And guess what? It worked.

Kiser: I guess so. That's too bad. In the end, the tide changed towards Lincoln because of the war. How did the final vote come out

Dr. Swint: It turned out he won pretty easily. By the time the election came around, the other side had splintered so badly and foundered so badly in their campaign that he really had no problem winning in the end. Thankfully for the country.

Kiser: Yeah, I don't know that George McClellan could have been as exciting of a historical figure as Abraham Lincoln has turned out to be.

Dr. Swint: I don't think it would have gone well.

Kiser: Richard Nixon, a Republican donates to the campaign of a Democrat. Find out how that came about in the last openly racist campaign in America. And you might be thinking that we're in the very worst era of negative campaigning. You'll want to hear what's next as we discuss how recent presidential campaigns fare on the list of the dirtiest campaigns in history.

How did a decision by a youth football organization lead to claims that they are weakening American society and emasculating American males? Join us next month to find out. We'll be talking to David Casillo, assistant professor of communication here at Kennesaw State University, about his research on framing in sports media. We'll discover whether the media shows support for athletes and organizations that make choices to protect health, or whether they frame it as just another case of creating a sissy generation, as one social media user claimed. Then we'll examine how the media coverage of mental health problems and athletes can promote or discourage certain types of activism. And we'll look at the media portrayal of LeBron James' activism and its implications for black athletes who want to promote change.

Your number one ranked campaign in the book is not a presidential election. It had to do with the election for governor in our neighboring state of Alabama. It was George Wallace versus Albert Brewer, back in 1970. A little closer to today. What's the backstory on how this election came about?

Dr. Kerwin: Out of the 25 examples in the book, the top 14 of them are presidential elections. Eleven of them are other kinds of election, like governor, U.S. Senate, U.S. House. The George Wallace election in 1970 is a great, horrible example

Kiser: A great example of horribleness.

Dr. Kiser A really great example of horribleness, horribleness. The vitriol, the nastiness, the name-calling, the dirty tricks behind the scenes. George Wallace was running against someone who was the current

governor, Albert Brewer, in 1974, in the Democratic nomination to run for governor. This was a one-off campaign. George Wallace had been governor previously. His wife Lurline was governor after him, but Lurline died in office. The Lieutenant Governor, Al Brewer, became governor. Wallace was challenging Brewer for the nomination. And they had been allies. They were both Democrats. Remember, at the time, there were no Republicans in Alabama. It was an all Democratic-run state. They had been allies. They had known each other. But Wallace, running for the governorship, pulled out all the stops. He attacked Brewer mercilessly, called him names, called him a sissy, called him a mama's boy. Wallace, at the time, was known for this racial vitriol, and Alabama, at the time, was the leading example of segregation. A very divided society. He was, unfortunately, a master of racial politics. He was known for using race and racism to win votes and scare white voters. He used that tactic against Al Brewer, saying that he was soft on the races and that he would be too inclined to accept racial integration, that he wasn't tough enough against the black vote and those kinds of interests. He went so far as to phony-up these pictures of Al Brewer appearing with African American entertainers of the time. And he started a rumor about Al Brewer's college-age daughter dating a black man. These were the lengths they went to. And, again, pamphlets, newsletters, taking a racist angle. I even interviewed people who remember that campaign that said that Wallace, at personal campaign appearances, would use the N-word during the rally and during personal appearances. Completely unafraid of any kind of backlash. Do I made that campaign number one, because of its relative recency—it was only 1970, which is in my lifetime compared to say 1828 or 1864—and because it was remembered as one of the last openly racist campaigns for major office in America. You know, it's funny, I thought the people in Alabama were going to be mad at me for talking about this as the worst campaign of all time. They actually enjoyed the attention. I forgot that Alabama likes to be number one whether it's football or negative elections. But it got a lot of attention in Alabama, and most people there said, yeah, it probably was the most negative campaign of all time.

Kiser: One of the things Wallace said is "There would be a spotted alliance of blacks and sissy britches from Harvard, who spent most of their time in a country club drinking tea with their finger stuck up." So, again, it is kind of clash of ideology here?

Dr. Swint: Yeah, he had a way with words. Brewer had this reputation as someone very well educated, someone very well read, sophisticated. He was comfortable on a cocktail circuit, that sort of thing. Wallace was making this class argument that Alabama needs a fighter or Alabama need somebody who knows what the deal is and Brewer's too out of touch. He's too much of an elite and he's going to hobnob with those college administrators, that sort of thing. So, Brewer did well in the cities and on college campuses and Wallace cleaned up everywhere else.

Kiser: This was really about Wallace wanting to run for president. Wasn't it a setup for that kind of a thing?

Dr. Swint: It seems like it. He needed the office of governor to be able to launch a presidential campaign in 1972. Wallace had run for president in 1968 as an independent and didn't get very far. So he believed that he needed a major party nomination so he wanted to run as a Democrat. He thought he needed the office of governor to have that national platform, to be able to raise money and to get the name identification out there. I think, in his mind, he developed this real racial animosity that he thought would propel him to the White House.

Kiser: When you talk about raising money, I thought another interesting thing is that President Nixon, who's a Republican, gave money to Brewer, a Democrat.

Dr. Swint: Yeah, that's crazy. That was a secret, a secret slush fund. Nixon didn't want to have to deal with Wallace in 1972, so he was helping Al Brewer. That's where that came from.

Kiser: Interesting. So, coming down to our day, do you think, if you were to redo this book today, would our current election fall somewhere in those top 25?

Dr. Swint: You bet. You bet. I wrote this book in 2006, and the paperback version came out in 2008, which was the year of Obama versus McCain. One of the reasons I wrote the book was that every time we have a presidential election, people seem to think, this is the most negative campaign I think we've ever had. You always hear, and you see that printed, and it's almost never true. Because historians and books like this prove that the worst campaigns really were in the 1800s. Much more negative we have been accustomed to the last 50 years or so.

Kiser: You can call the 1800s one of the Golden Ages of negative campaigning.

Dr. Swint: It absolutely was a golden age of negative campaigning. And then I say, also, that some of the more recent campaigns might enter that sort of fame, another Golden Age. But yeah, if I was going to rewrite the book now—and now I have to rewrite the book.

Kiser: You've got so much more information.

Dr. Swint: Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton was historically such a personally nasty campaign. You usually don't have two candidates that are that personal. They usually talk about policy, and they may refer to somebody as soft on crime or soft on the Soviet Union or that sort of thing. But to launch in and call each other names and talk about each other the way they did in 2016 was historically bad. I would have to put that one in the book now, and, I have a feeling...

Kiser: The way things are going.

Dr. Swint: We're not to November yet, so by the time November rolls around, this may be on the list, too.

Kiser: What are some things that are going on in the current presidential campaign that that you consider really dirty tactics?

Dr. Swint: Well, it's really bad when they talk about each other's personal characteristics. That's normally what a lot of voters recoil against. Voters understand that they're going to criticize each other and they're going to criticize each other's policies and their positions on issues. But when you talk about someone in a personal way, like they're a bad person—they're evil, they're a racist, they're a criminal—that's been going both ways in between the two parties. That's what voters really find distasteful and really recoil from, for good reason. I think that we sunk to a level of personal animosity. The last election years we were able to avoid that. There were a few times—Bush and Dukakis in 88. There was George W. Bush and John Kerry in 2004. They got really personal, but 2016 and 2020 are just low points, I think.

Kiser: Yeah. And there's so many things that are happening now that are chances for people to really lay into each other. The pandemic, and now the post office. Who knew the post office was going to become a political issue?

Dr. Swint: It's that incredible? Now we're fighting over the post office. This year we have fought over everything. This has been one of the most memorable horrible years. We started off with impeachment. We go to a global pandemic. And then we go to these massive civil disturbances and riots. And now the post office. It's been one thing after another this year, really the whole four years, when you think about it. It's made people on both sides very sensitive and very defensive and very angry. I've got to tell you, as a college professor, I worry about the students who don't feel like they can even talk about politics or talk about issues in the open, because they're afraid. And that's a sad state of affairs, I think.

Kiser: Even the wearing of masks has become politicized, so I think people are afraid of other people's reactions and they don't really want to talk about it. I know one of the things that may be new... you can tell me if this is new, because I've learned a lot about what's not new from reading your book... is people are even worried about that we might have a presidential election where the loser might refuse to concede?.

Dr. Swint: You know you don't hear that a lot. We haven't heard that a lot in this country, and it's not something we've had to worry about really since the Civil War. That's probably the last time that that kind of thing might have come up. It's born out of this fear of the other side. It's an accusation that they're hurling against President Trump partly because he's talking about how this election is going to be rigged if you let this massive mail-in balloting occur. But, if you remember, he talked about a rigged election in 2016. I think that's part of his shtick, part of his gaming when he talks about this election being rigged, so you can't trust the outcome. The other side, the Democrats, particularly Speaker Pelosi, takes that to mean he may not even leave the White House if he loses and we're going to have to use the army to get him out or something. That's just a lot of talk, and I don't think anything like that is going to happen. But it tells you where we are as a society that talk like that is even being taken seriously.

Kiser: I read a quote in Politico that said, "Voters this fall will have to navigate a news and information environment so polluted that it could be an EPA Superfund site." That got me thinking: How has the media, and especially the rise of social media, played into all this negativity in campaigns?

Dr. Swint: That's really interesting, because every year in our country's political history, the media, the mass media, has played a significant role, all the way back to the partisan press of the 1800s, for example. Then you have the 20th century and the rise of radio and television advertising. So, the media has been a dominant player in our politics, and the media has been a dominant issue in all our elections. It seems, in some ways, that we're getting back to the old days of the partisan press, where newspaper reporters, columnists, broadcasters seem to be taking sides in these political disputes. It's not only Fox News versus CNN, but it's also a lot of the mainstream broadcasters and other outlets who seem to be advocating for one side or another. That leads a lot of people to not want to trust the media as an objective source of information. It's made even worse, though, by, as you mentioned, social media—Facebook and Twitter and Instagram. Those are such personal media, because people can take part in that. Anybody can have a Twitter page. Anybody can make a Facebook post. Other sorts of social media are out there as well, where people can really take part in these disputes and make their views known and respond to other people. I've got to tell you, I have a Twitter page but I try to stay away from it because it is so toxic. People just resort to all kinds of innuendo, bad faith and name calling. It seems like President Trump has used Twitter as a weapon. He's weaponized Twitter. I understand that it's a political calculation that that he's making, but it also raises the bar, because a lot of people respond to

what he says and that starts another round of responding and counter-responding. It just gets unbearable at times.

Kiser: I think you're right. I know everybody's pretty aware that people will say things on social media that they would never say in person or maybe even on traditional media. That opens up a huge amount of negativity.

Dr. Swint: We know social media has democratized communications in a way where everybody can participate, but that can have a bad side, too. If everybody can say whatever they want to say that's going to get out of hand.

Kiser: There are pluses and minuses. I know that President Trump makes no bones that he is not a fan of the media, the traditional media. Has that been something that we've encountered in the past, or is that a new thing for a president to have a real antagonistic kind of relationship with the press?

Dr. Swint: That's something else that really goes back to the founding of the country—a president having an antagonistic relationship with the press. We've seen that go through different phases. Some obviously have a better relationship than others. FDR, Roosevelt, had a terrific relationship with the press. Ironically, so did Ronald Reagan, because he treated them well and gave them such access. So, it's not unusual, it's very common really, for particularly Republican presidential candidates in the last several decades to run against the media. In fact when George Herbert Walker Bush was running in 92, I remember a bumper sticker that said, Annoy the media. Vote for Bush. That kind of sentiment has been around for a while. But Trump is really the first president that has taken it to the next level, where he actually calls the media the enemy of the people. He will do a press conference, and if you see any of these press conferences, it's like a battle zone. He is standing up there is like Clint Eastwood, Go ahead. Make my day. Wanting to start a fight.

Kiser: That fight with the media. Definitely. It's a big show to watch some of the press conferences they have nowadays. I think it used to be kind of boring. Nowadays, it might be a little interesting to see the animosity that's happening in those press conferences.

Dr. Swint: It's amazing the amount of animosity. But, as I say, I think that Trump considers that's part of his strategy. He's trying to make the press appear to be antagonistic and against the interests of the common man. A lot of people would say he's actually done a pretty good job of accomplishing that, if you look at the way this is going,

Kiser: Interesting to see all their campaign tactics and all the things that have been done throughout history. And that we're experiencing more of the same. Do you have any last words of wisdom for us?

Dr. Swint: I hope that this comes to a tipping point. And I hope we can get back to a place where at least it's not as personal and where people don't feel like it's okay just to say whatever they want about someone else, regardless of the consequences. That's the worst thing about our current state of affairs. I hope next year we can get back to what George Herbert Walker Bush called, "a kinder, gentler nation."

Kiser: I think we all could use a little of that right now. We could use a break, definitely. No more disasters, no more negativity. Some positivity. Thanks so much for joining us today, Kerwin. This has been a very interesting look at elections throughout history and the contentious things that happen and a good hope for the future.

Dr. Swint: You're very welcome. It's been a pleasure talking to you. Thanks very much.

Kiser: Thank you.

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