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Roorback the Smear Artist

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Oct. 29—The last few days of a political campaign are always the most dangerous, for then candidates are vulnerable to damaging and misleading attacks which they have no time to answer. The last-minute smear is one of the oldest and ugliest tactics of American politics, and lately it has been used against Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine, among others.

For example, a three-quarter page ad has recently been appearing in some Maine newspapers signed by Carl L. Shipley, a Republican national committeeman from the District of Columbia, who identifies himself as "Treasurer, Committee for a Responsible Congress."

The advertisement asks: "What kind of man is Edmund Muskie?" and answers as follows: "You can't be sure by what he says today in Maine at election time. But you can find out something about him by taking a look at what he and his friends, whose support he accepts, have been saying all along. If you agree with their views on excusing lawlessness, on undermining national defense, on forgiving rioters and looters, and on accepting the use of marijuana and heroin by our young people, then Muskie is your kind of man."

Fortunately, Senator Muskie had time to publicize and dramatize this as "a vicious, irresponsible, deliberate untruth," but a similar ad was run against Senator Joe Tydings in Maryland and Congressman Tunney, the Democratic candidate for the Senate in California, and it is a warning of what can be expected in the closing hours of this squalid campaign.

The Presidential campaign of 1844 gave a name to this sort of thing. It was called a "Roorback." At that time, when the Tennessee Democrat, James

WASHINGTON

K. Polk, was running against Henry Clay of Virginia, then a Whig, the Ithaca (New York) Chronicle, a Whig newspaper, published what purported to be an excerpt from one Baron Roorback's journal in which Roorback claimed to have watched the purchase of 43 slaves by Polk with "the mark of the branding iron and the initials of his name on their shoulders..."

In actual fact, though this was widely reprinted just before the voting, and Polk actually won the election, there was no such event, and there was no Baron Roorback; but the last-minute smear was established and we have had "Roorbacks" ever since.

What is interesting now, however, is not that the dirty tricks of politics go on but that they seem to be accepted so casually. Many of the one-minute political television ads are based on the same kind of misleading statements as the Muskie ad, with quotes taken out of context and the candidate accused of believing any statement ever made by any of his supporters.

Even our most respectable colleagues on The Wall Street Journal dismiss the current political appeals to fear by recalling, quite accurately, that the Democrats have often done the same thing. Boys will be boys, they seem to be saying a little sadly. "But let it pass; mostly we remember a quote from that wise old American philosopher, Mr. Dooley: 'Politics ain't beanbag.'"

Which is true enough, but one thing is fairly clear. This dirty stuff won't "pass" until the voters demonstrate that it doesn't pay off on Election Day. No doubt Mr. Shipley thought he would get away with the smear on Senator Muskie or he wouldn't have

placed the ads. Tens of millions are being spent on tricky TV ads in this campaign—all on the assumption that the papers and the voters will either let them pass or shrug them off.

Every campaign seems to develop new techniques designed to mislead the public. For example, in this campaign, Mr. Nixon has been condemning campus protesters, which is fair enough, but Newsweek magazine reports this week that in order to dramatize the President's counterattacks on the student radicals, "on occasion the President's staff leaks a few hecklers into the hall so that Mr. Nixon may back them down."

Hugh Sidey makes the same point in this week's Life magazine. "Nixon's advance men," he writes, "this fall have carefully arranged with local police to allow enough dissenters in the staging areas so the President will have his theme well illustrated as he warms to his job."

Well, as Carl Shipley would probably say, if that's the sort of politics you want, all you have to do is let it pass. But in a way, the real issue of the 1970 Congressional elections is not the candidates but the tactics. For one thing is fairly clear: the President is making a test in this election to see whether his appeals to fear of crime, drugs, smut and permissiveness in general can be used to create a new conservative political majority in America.

If the Nixon-Agnew-Chotiner-type of scare politics works in the '70 election, it is almost sure to be carried over into the Presidential election of 1972, dividing and polarizing the politics of the nation even more than at present. This is what this campaign is all about: it is about the integrity of our national politics, and if this cannot somehow be established, it is hard to imagine how we can solve the rest of our staggering problems.