



Kerry vets say fight back hard — and swiftly

By: [David Paul Kuhn](#)
August 13, 2008 07:44 PM EST

Four years ago this month, the release of a critical book by Jerome R. Corsi undercut the cornerstone of Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry's campaign narrative, his military service in Vietnam.

Now, Corsi has reappeared with another popular book, "The Obama Nation: Leftist Politics and the Cult of Personality," attacking yet another Democratic nominee, Barack Obama. And Kerry's former top advisers, who decided to initially pull their punches in 2004, believe this time Democrats must fight back hard — and fight back now.

"In hindsight, we made a mistake in not responding more forcefully," said Steve Elmendorf, Kerry's 2004 deputy campaign manager.

Referring to Corsi's most recent book, Elmendorf said, "It's on the front page of The New York Times. It's number one on The New York Times best-seller list. Right now, I would be very aggressive with reporters and factually going through the book and responding and making it clear that this is a bunch of bullsh-t."

Kerry himself is already implementing the lessons of 2004. The Massachusetts senator launched a website Wednesday, Truth Fights Back, challenging the assertions in Corsi's book. Kerry sent an e-mail to his former supporters headlined, "Book on Obama Hopes to Repeat Anti-Kerry Feat."

Former Kerry campaign advisers believe Obama's senior aides must figure out how to effectively and directly respond to the book. Obama spokesman Tommy Vietor said the campaign is speaking to reporters to directly challenge the merits of the book.

He added in an email that "this book is nothing but a series of lies that were long ago discredited, written by an individual who was discredited after he wrote a similar book to help George Bush and Dick Cheney get re-elected four years ago."

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"The Obama campaign is going to have to decide if they are going to go after this, who is going to do it, and to what extent they are going to do that, because they have to be careful not to blow it up," said a former member of Kerry's inner circle, who would only speak on the condition of anonymity.

The one-time senior adviser added, "Obama's campaign has to absolutely make sure they can respond to every charge and make sure they have all the research on this because

the lack of this [research] was an enormous impediment to responding to the ads and the Swift Boat book."

Corsi's coauthored 2004 book, "Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry," became the foundation for a small advertising campaign attacking both the merits of Kerry's service in Vietnam — where he was thrice-decorated with Purple Hearts — as well as Kerry's stance against the war after returning stateside.

Kerry initially wanted to respond directly to the charges but his top circle of advisers, after heated debate, counseled against it, former senior advisers have said. In the subsequent weeks that August, as the national media picked up the story and began constantly looping the ads, Kerry's campaign reversed itself and went on the offensive. Today, within Kerry's circle and outside it, the view is that the response was too late.

"Kerry wanted to make sure the charges were rebutted," the former senior adviser said. Surrogates including longtime Democratic top operative John Podesta responded instead.

"At a certain point it was not enough," the adviser explained.

By taking public financing for the general election, the Kerry campaign further limited its ability to respond aggressively on the airwaves, aides said, which affected the decision not to launch a major advertising rebuttal.

Obama does not have Kerry's financial limitations. Furthermore, some former Kerry advisers are now well embedded into the Obama campaign. Jim Margolis, a one-time Kerry media consultant, is now a senior Obama adviser, and Stephanie Cutter, the Kerry campaign's spokeswoman, is now chief of staff to Michelle Obama. Other top Kerry advisers, such as former campaign manager Mary Beth Cahill, also converse with members of Obama's inner circle on occasion.

The Obama campaign first must "authoritatively debunk every single assertion, probably in writing," said Tad Devine, Kerry's chief strategist in 2004. He added that Obama's campaign should also implement an "absolutely frontal attack on the people making the charges" as well as establish "connections between this effort and [John] McCain's campaign."

But Devine added that he also believes that Obama should not escalate the issue as long as it remains only in print by responding with, say, television advertising or with a statement by Obama.

"It's a tricky issue even four years later. I think the fundamental dynamic is that when you engage and create conflict in American politics, you also create coverage of that conflict," Devine added.

Still, he said, the lesson of 2004 is "to be appropriately aggressive."

Today, many in the Kerry campaign also blame the news media for elevating the Swift Boat book's profile.

"This gentleman disqualified himself as a source or as an honest person in 2004," said

Joe Lockhart, a former spokesman for Bill Clinton who was brought into the Kerry campaign to help after the Swift Boat ads began.

"[Corsi] proved himself to be a destructive liar. Any reporter who doesn't either have the memory or the good sense to remember the lies he told and the effects that those lies had, should look into their heart and remember why they got into the reporting business," Lockhart continued, grudgingly adding that he believed the allegations would still be widely covered. "By the middle of next week, everybody in the country is going to know all the accusations."

Corsi told Politico he stands by his book. "I'm not running from anything," he said. He added, "I'm an investigative reporter, that's what I consider myself." But he also said that "I disclose what my values are," which he has said includes opposing Obama's bid to be president.

Corsi's new book will, on Aug. 17, top The New York Times hard-cover nonfiction bestseller list, the newspaper reported on its front page today. Accompanying the article online, the newspaper also published the preface of Corsi's book. By Wednesday afternoon, Corsi's book was ranked No. 6 on Amazon.com.

Kenneth P. Vogel contributed to this story.

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