GOLDEN STATE

Ad saying Biden has dementia ‘cynical’ and ‘shameful’

STEVE LOPEZ

There really should be an alert system in place for TV campaign ads in the run-up to the November election. Red lights would flash and sirens would wail right before they aired, so you could quickly change channels or dive behind the sofa before you’re sucked into the fetid squalor of the political season.

The idea came to me during an early June visit with family in central Pennsylvania. I happened to be watching television one night, and a political ad popped up on the screen.

I was slow on the remote trigger, so I watched the ad, which began with a critique of Bidenonmics. “Americans are struggling,” the narrator said, and yes, many are struggling. But that has been the case during every presidential administration.

“Biden’s ignoring our problems,” the ad continued. Well, not exactly, but nuance and complexity are a tough sell.

And then came the part that really got my attention: “He keeps denying reality,” the narrator said.

“Is it dishonesty or dementia?”

OK, let’s stop there.

As we are all aware, this is down-and-dirty season, when the wicked and the vile sharpen their knives, and we fully expect things to get nasty, especially given the rancid state of American politics.

But dishonesty or dementia?

That crosses a line, not that anyone should be surprised.

“If the concept of shame still exists, I’d call it shameful,” said Dr. Laura Mosqueda, a Keck-USC geriatrician and director of the National Center on Elder Abuse. “This is a cynical and sad attempt to plant a seed with zero basis in fact. There is not one shred of

evidence that President Biden has dementia. It does a disservice to people who truly do have dementia and does a disservice to all older adults with its ageist messaging tactics."

So if you're wondering about the "not one shred of evidence" part of Mosqueda's response, given Biden's occasional fumbles, here's an explanation from Dr. Zaldy Tan, a neurologist and director of Cedars-Sinai Health System's Memory and Aging Program:

"Dementia is a medical diagnosis and can only be done by a qualified healthcare provider who has personally examined the person," Tan said. "It is a serious neurologic condition that should not be taken lightly. It is not a label that should be given casually."

So how is such a diagnosis made?

By obtaining a history of symptoms and "performing a cognitive evaluation, and a neurological examination, and ruling out other causes of memory or cognitive change," Tan said. "In my view, stating that an older person must have dementia is an ageist and unfair statement. It is similar to saying that a public figure who has recently lost weight must have cancer."

Someone should have mentioned that to Robert Hur, the special counsel who interviewed Biden about his handling of classified material. Hur called the president "a well meaning, elderly man with a poor memory." Biden said, defiantly: "My memory is fine."

It's possible Biden has an issue, but we don't know that.

The ad in question was "paid for by Make America Great Again Inc.," and "not authorized by any candidate or candidate's committee," says the small print on the ad. Politico reported that Securing American Greatness, a nonprofit "dark money" group (donors don't have to be disclosed) was behind the ad and that the group is run by Taylor Budowich, a former spokesman for Donald Trump.

What came to mind after I watched the ad was that old line suggesting that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw the first stone. Any Trump surrogate or supporter who's being honest has to admit that mental acuity and coherent discourse are topics best avoided.

On Sunday, at a rally in Las Vegas, Trump took a rambling hypothetical journey into uncharted waters. Trump speculated — for no clear reason — whether it would be worse to die of electrocution or to be eaten by a shark. The context, quite loosely, was fossil fuel alternatives and a conversation Trump claimed to have had about electric vessels with a boat manufacturer.

You must watch the video, if you haven't already seen it, especially if you've been scratching your head and wondering what would happen if you were in a battery-powered boat that began taking on water on the open sea.

Spoiler alert: After telling the audience he was "very smart" because of his "relationship with MIT" (an uncle was a professor there), Trump concluded, "You know what I'd do, if there was a shark or you get electrocuted? I'd take electrocution every single time."

Well, taking a firm stand on important issues is certainly what we're looking for in our leaders.

And aging, by the way, is a topic rich with policy-making opportunities, given how close the U.S. is to having a population with more people who are older than 65 than are younger than 18.

Should the candidates choose to weigh in constructively, they would acknowledge that the country faces great challenges when it comes to expanding the elder-care workforce, developing ample affordable housing, and managing the needs of a generation that's living longer, reinventing the rules of retirement and searching for ways to contribute through extended careers or volunteering opportunities.

Biden, 81, and Trump, who turns 78 on Friday, would do well to embrace all those challenges rather than feed stereotypes.

"The assumption that Donald Trump or Joe Biden may have dementia is unethical and stigmatizes people living with dementia," said Craig Fleishman, advancement director of OPICA, an adult day care and memory loss treatment center in West L.A. The TV ad's suggestion that Biden might have dementia "is said in a negative and demeaning manner. This is not helpful to people living with dementia and their families, who … often struggle with the condition every day."

I visited OPICA last summer while profiling the lives of Mannie Rezende and his wife, Rose, a family therapist who juggles work and the needs of her husband, one of roughly 7 million Americans diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I asked Rose to watch the ad and send me her thoughts.

"No matter where one resides on the political spectrum, the flippancy with which this ad uses the clinical term 'dementia' is cruel and disrespectful to those suffering with it," she wrote.

Dementia "is a series of progressive and heart-breaking losses that clearly do not describe Biden," she continued. It is "one of the most harrowing of diseases. It involves the progressive unwinding of the self … from early-on memory loss to … the loss of language, recognition, motor ability, and, finally, death. It is a clinical term, and to use it so misleadingly is, to me as a therapist and wife of a husband with the disease, unethical and immoral."

I couldn't have said it better myself.

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California is about to be hit by an aging population wave, and Steve Lopez is riding it. His column focuses on the blessings and burdens of advancing age — and how some folks are challenging the stigma associated with older adults.