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McCain VP pick now has Obama camp watching its words

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With one calculating ad and a surprising vice-presidential nomination, Republican John McCain is seeking to turn the tables on Democrat Barack Obama.

After treading lightly for months to avoid a slip or slight that could be seen as a racial attack, McCain's camp converted the glass ceiling into thin ice for the Obama campaign. They did it with a pick that almost dares Democrats to criticize Sarah Palin and risk charges of insensitivity or sexism.

"I think the Clinton campaign has heightened the sensitivity of women about any kind of implied or inferred slight," said Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

"The Palin nomination," she said, "has kind of reopened those sensitive feelings."

The trap was set when McCain aired an ad congratulating Obama on his historic nomination as the Democratic candidate on Thursday. The next day, McCain made history by tapping Palin, the Alaska governor, as the first woman running mate on a GOP ticket.

Obama's campaign quickly fell into the net, firing out a statement hitting Palin as inexperienced -- before Obama had second thoughts and issued a statement praising Palin for her own historic moment.

Saturday the McCain campaign signaled it's ready to debate whether Palin actually has more experience than Obama, a first-term U.S. senator and former state legislator.

That move carries the implied threat that if Obama's camp dismisses Palin's accomplishments as a businesswoman, small town mayor and Alaska governor of 19 months as inadequate, McCain's backers will charge it's because she's a woman.

The Obama campaign is approaching this new minefield carefully. After its first misstep, the campaign has been careful to praise her for making history when they mention her. But it might have decided it's safer not to even bring her up, except as an extension of McCain.

"We are not attacking her personally, and we are not attacking McCain," said Obama campaign manager David Axelrod.

"We are attacking a philosophy that has taken this country down the wrong road ... and the fact that she embraces that philosophy, and that's why she's on the ticket is notable."

A new Obama ad about her released Saturday simply links her to McCain and Bush.



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Hillary Rodham Clinton did not mention Palin in her radio address Saturday. But surrogates such as Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri and Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida may well attack, Obama aides said.

On the stump, folks who are introducing Obama and Biden are reciting talking points, comparing the size of Alaska to their own states and the size the place where Palin was mayor to local towns and cities.

Even Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) hedged, calling Palin's selection "potentially reckless" in an e-mailed statement Saturday.

But Obama appears to be trying subtlety and finesse.

In excerpts from a CBS "60 Minutes" interview with Obama to air Sunday night, he responds to a question about Palin by saying, "She seems to have a compelling life story. Obviously, she's a fine mother and an up and coming public servant."

Later, Obama says about his own running mate: "Let me tell you the reason I picked Joe Biden. No. 1 -- he can step in and become president. And I don't think anybody has any doubt about that."

But both campaigns are still feeling their way through the sensitive politics of race and gender, Mandel said. "Competitive elections always are played out on minefields," she said. "This year the battlefield and minefield may be a little more dangerous than in the past."

-- Staff writer *Nia-Malika Henderson* reported from *Dublin, Ohio*.

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