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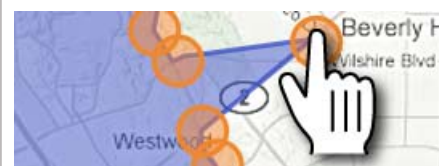
## No break, and no niceties, in general election races

Days after primary, Carly Fiorina insults her opponent's hair and Jerry Brown invokes Nazi comparisons. Strategists bemoan the ugly words and the focus on style rather than on substantive policy differences.



Republican Senate nominee Carly Fiorina speaks at J.W. Lumber in San Diego. The shirts hanging behind Fiorina represent eight workers recently laid off. (Denis Poroy, Associated Press / June 11, 2010)

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Brown, Whitman come out slugging

By Robin Abcarian, Los Angeles Times

June 13, 2010 | 8:14 p.m.



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Only days have passed since Republicans and Democrats picked their candidates in high-profile contests for the state's governorship and one of its U.S. Senate seats. If California voters thought they'd be treated to a gracious interlude before the general election starts in earnest, they can forget it.

Voters barely had time to absorb the historic nomination of two women to the top of the statewide Republican ticket before the insults began to fly.

A day after the primary, Republican Senate candidate Carly Fiorina, the former Hewlett-Packard chief executive, was caught on an open microphone making a remark worthy of an insecure seventh-grader about her Democratic opponent, Sen. Barbara Boxer: "God, what is that hair? Sooooo yesterday."

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Moments later, Fiorina's campaign sent its first e-mail blast of a new regular feature: "Boxer Bites."

Then Jerry Brown, the Democrats' candidate for governor, weighed in, making a heavy-handed comparison between the campaign tactics of his opponent, Meg Whitman, and Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels.

High-profile campaigns spend fortunes constructing the policy positions and political strategies they think will carry them to victory. But the events of the last week show how quickly issues of style, gaffes and the like can complicate the plans of even the best-financed or most experienced campaigns.

In the Senate contest, those stylistic points may matter even more than usual because Boxer and Fiorina have a lot of the same vulnerabilities.

Both are known for their sometimes prickly demeanor and can come off as condescending and sarcastic on occasion. Because she has been in the public eye for nearly 18 years as a senator, many Californians already have observed those qualities in Boxer.

But they may be taken aback to see them in Fiorina, who moments before insulting Boxer's coif had also criticized Whitman, whom she would soon embrace at a victory rally, for choosing to be interviewed by Fox News' Sean Hannity.

"I think it's a very bad choice, actually," said Fiorina, who fiddled with her BlackBerry, chatted with staff and failed to suppress a yawn as she waited to be interviewed by a Sacramento TV station. "You know how he is."

The gaffe prompted longtime Republican media strategist Nicolle Wallace to rebuke Fiorina. "She is a good and decent person, she is better than that woman in the video," Wallace said Friday.

In an essay about the gaffe in the Daily Beast on Thursday, Wallace wrote, "Women will continue to take two steps forward and three steps back until they drop the sorority girl act and become the statesmen and leaders we all need." As a top aide to Sen. John McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin, in the 2008 presidential campaign, Wallace witnessed some of the unique challenges female candidates face.

Fiorina, she said, "should apologize for being catty and move on. Every gaffe can be an opportunity to show some grace."

But Fiorina had already dug in her heels. "My hair's been talked about by a million people, you know?" she told Fox News' Greta Van Susteren. "As you remember, I started out with none," she said, alluding to her treatment last year for stage 2 breast cancer.

In an interview Sunday with Chris Wallace of Fox News, Fiorina said, "I regret this whole situation. I gave people the opportunity to talk about something petty and superficial. And this is a very serious election year about serious issues."


When asked whether she had apologized to Boxer, Fiorina changed the subject: "You know, what I think I owe the voters is a commitment to stay focused on facts, on issues and on the things that really matter."


Fiorina, as the GOP strategist and others have noted, is often very charming and polished. But she can display a chief executive's impatience and hauteur when she is challenged or contradicted.


Boxer also does not suffer disrespect gladly. Sometimes her brusqueness is a political calculation


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designed to appease supporters, a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has watched senators hold forth during televised hearings. Other times, it comes across as pique.

"I think part of that comes from what it takes to work your way into two of the most exclusive men's clubs in the world — the U.S. Senate or CEO of a Fortune 20 company," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "These are the strategies and tactics that they have taken to get there."

Still, Walsh bemoaned the inevitable, and sexist, "cat fight" narrative that takes hold when women compete and Fiorina's part in hastening it. "Her comment feeds this image that when women run against each other, they're getting down and dirty and clawing each others' eyes out."

For months, Fiorina has battered away at Boxer's personal style, slamming her as rude and elitist. She has helped popularize a paraphrase of a Boxer quote — "Don't call me ma'am" — that has become a Republican meme in the last year.

Relished by Boxer haters, the slogan is based on an incident last June, when Army Corps of Engineers Brig. Gen. Michael Walsh testified about post-Hurricane Katrina coastal restoration before the Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works, of which Boxer is chairwoman.

Boxer seemed irritated that the Corps had delayed a report it was legally obliged to complete, and she interrupted Walsh at several points, once saying, "Don't give the whole history," and another time saying "Do me a favor. Can you say 'Senator' instead of 'Ma'am'? It's just a thing. I worked so hard to get that title, so I'd appreciate it."

"Yes, Senator," responded Walsh, who had also addressed her as "Madame Chairman" several times.

Fiorina has worked hard to keep the moment alive, for reasons of style and substance.

It bolsters Fiorina's claim that Boxer is arrogant: "When she dressed down that general in front of the cameras," Fiorina said in her victory speech Tuesday, "she displayed the destructive elitism that is so disquieting to the people of California."

And it dovetails with her contention that some of Boxer's votes have undermined the military, which Boxer denies. Fiorina argues that disrespecting a general equals disrespecting the troops.

Fiorina's campaign has even created a website, [callmebarbara.com](http://callmebarbara.com), that features a clip of the exchange and bills it as "The 30 seconds Barbara Boxer doesn't want you to see."

At a pre-primary event in Los Angeles, Boxer scoffed at the idea that correcting Walsh was a sign of disrespect.

"Gen. Walsh is a really good friend of mine," she said after a news conference at Los Angeles International Airport. "In my hearings, I try to use the formal terminology, so I called him 'General,' not 'Sir.' That's the context." (Before Walsh testified, however, Boxer addressed Sen. David Vitter (R-La.) as "David.")

Fiorina "can do whatever she wants," Boxer said. "I am proud of my record. I love the military, my husband served in the military and I have veterans supporting me."

On Friday, Walsh said through a spokeswoman that he considered the issue "over and done with" and "not worth dredging up."

Nicolle Wallace, the GOP strategist, said the profound ideological differences between Fiorina and Boxer will ensure a fascinating race on the issues alone.

"These two women can have a debate over issues with the depth and breadth that don't require any side shows," she said. "This was just not a good way to start."

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