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POLITICO

Obama's campaign whisperer

By: Glenn Thrush and Jonathan Martin

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Barack Obama's top advisers are making a mid-"core" correction in their attacks on Mitt Romney — with a little nudge from Bill Clinton, who is finding a niche as an Obama campaign whisperer and fundraiser.

Late last year, as Romney galloped to the right, Obama's messaging team hit on what it assumed would be a durable bumper-sticker attack: Romney, senior advisers David Plouffe and David Axelrod intoned time and again, was a political shape-shifter who lacked any real moral or political "core."

The slogan was *the* Obama talking point for months. But Clinton, echoing survey data presented by Obama's own pollster Joel Benenson, quietly argued that the empty-core approach failed to capitalize on what they see as Romney's greatest vulnerability: An embrace of a brand of tea party conservatism that turns off Hispanics, women and moderate independents.

A more effective strategy, Clinton has told anyone who would listen, would be to focus almost exclusively on Romney's description of himself as a "severe conservative," to deny him any chance to tack back to the center, according to three Democrats close to the situation.

"[Clinton] said he thought Romney's positions on the issues would ultimately be the best way to attack him," said a Democrat briefed on the details of an amiable Nov. 9 meeting in Clinton's Harlem office that included Axelrod, Democratic National Committee Executive Director Patrick Gaspard and Obama campaign manager Jim Messina.

"That's what we are doing, but it doesn't mean we can't and shouldn't do the etch-a-sketch, flip-flop moments when they occur and we will," added the operative — who says

Obama's campaign likely would have emphasized Romney's conservative tilt once the primary was over, anyway.

But Clinton's advice, buttressed by Benenson's polling, has clearly gained traction internally since the end of Romney's four-month primary ordeal. "The decision here is that if you are going to pin a tail on the donkey," says a top Democratic strategist who supported the Clinton view, "let's make it the conservative tail."

The new line of assault was on display Sunday with both Axelrod and Stephanie Cutter taking to the network shows to portray Romney as a conservative throwback to the economic policies of the previous administration.

"He's actually proposing, more massive tax cuts for the wealthy, fewer rules for Wall Street, deep cuts in the thing we need to grow, education, research and development, energy," said Axelrod on NBC's "Meet the Press," showing delight in a recent claim by a junior Republican National Committee aide that the Romney campaign's policies were "just-updated" versions of Bush-era programs.

"I think people are going to say," Axelrod added. "We've seen this movie before, and it didn't work."

Last week, senior administration officials surprised reporters in a White House background briefing by correcting a questioner who suggested that Obama thought Romney had his "finger in the wind."

The rebuke: Romney's core is now filled in. With craven right-wing craziness.

The backgrounder, in turn, spawned a New York Times story, which allowed Plouffe to trial-balloon a new line of attack, comparing Romney to the archetypal GOP extremist loser: "Whether it's tax policy, whether it's his approach to abortion, gay rights, immigration, he's the most conservative nominee that they've had going back to [1964 Republican candidate Barry] Goldwater."

The episode provides a glimpse into the deliberations of Obama's vaunted message operation, led by Axelrod and Plouffe, two veteran operatives adept at stoking voters' aspirations for a better future or hanging sticky "kick me" sign on their enemies.

It also shows the influence retained by Clinton, who will be joining Obama at an April 29 fundraiser in Virginia and raising cash for Obama's cash-poor super PAC.

And of all the news-cycle trifles during the campaign's silly-season April kickoff — 7-Eleven cookies, dog-meat tweets and Seamus-in-the-box — the "core" shift may be the least trivial, a rhetorical exercise that is, in the broader context of neck-and-neck contest, only superficially superficial.

Obama's central mission in the campaign's opening days is to paint the most unflattering possible portrait of Romney before his protean opponent can redefine himself as a palatable, nonthreatening moderate.

Yet for all the targets of opportunity Romney presents for them, Obama's team is struggling with its own core messaging dilemma: Do you throw everything against the wall to see what sticks — or narrow the narrative to avoid muddling the message?

"I think it's kind of curious that they are now starting to portray him as a right winger as opposed to a weather vane. ... You can't just keep changing these things around, they have to have more of consistent message or nobody will buy it," said veteran GOP consultant John Weaver, who ran Jon Huntsman's unsuccessful bid for the Republican nomination.

Weaver agrees that extremist core is a more effective approach than no core.

"Both sides only need to care about 8 to 12 percent of the electorate comprised of switchable Hispanics, working women and independents. So being tied to the extreme elements on the partisan margins is more harmful than being perceived as a flip-flopper," says Weaver, a longtime adviser to 2008 GOP nominee John McCain.

"Being a flip-flopper might actual help Romney. It shows he's not an unreasonable person."

Obama's aides deny there's any serious debate about messaging and that all the core arguments add up to a single, coherent message about Romney's trustworthiness, or lack thereof.

Moreover, Bob Shrum, who helped run Ted Kennedy's successful 1994 Senate campaign against Romney, takes issue with Clinton's advice. An all-of-the-above strategy worked then and should work now.

"I think they are doing the right thing, it's all part of the same narrative — that Romney doesn't care about anybody but himself," said Shrum, who ran John Kerry's unsuccessful 2004 campaign against George W. Bush. "It's coherent."

But the key, he added, was coming up with a succinct way of tying all the narrative strands together. In his case it was mocking Romney's changes on abortion. "The most effective attack we had was that he wasn't pro-choice, he was multiple-choice ... something like that."

Romney's advisers, for their part, are seizing on the shift as a sign of Obama's own lack of core political conviction.

"This is a White House in search of a reason for reelection," Romney spokeswoman Andrea Saul told POLITICO.

Saul and other Romney advisers say they have been stunned by their opponent's failure to concoct a more consistent anti-Romney message, emailing links to the various Obama attack lines on the presumptive GOP nominee — tying him to Bush, the Supreme Court, Republican House leadership, Rush Limbaugh, and accusing him of having no core and then filling one up, as the need arises.

"They are grasping at straws," Saul wrote in an email. "The Obama campaign first said President Obama was going to run on his record and the election would be a referendum

on his handling of the economy. When it was clear that wouldn't work, his team said they were going to adopt a "Kill Mitt" strategy. Then came their plan to run against President Bush (again) and, then, against Congress. Next they tried to claim Gov. Romney had no core. Now they're trying to claim his core is not mainstream. Each new day brings a different made-up attack from the Obama campaign — what doesn't change is the fact that President Obama has failed and so is going to try to tear down Mitt Romney instead of talking about his record."

Despite the recent shift, Obama's campaign is likely to pound away on three distinct Romney-cores: No Core, Conservative Core and Bain Core, leveraging Romney's years at Bain Capital to make the case that he's out of touch and deaf to the concerns of working people.

It's not like senior Obama officials haven't been hammering Romney for his increasingly conservative positions on immigration or women's reproductive rights already: Stephanie Cutter, one of the party's most experienced messaging operatives, oversees entire units of Obama's Chicago-based reelection campaign whose sole job is to do just that.

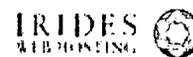
And Axelrod, for one, is still taking to Twitter to gleefully remind his 81,000 followers of Romney aide Eric Fehrnstrom's now-infamous claim that the Boston-based campaign would shake the "Etch-a-Sketch" after putting away Rick Santorum.

"Etch-a-Sketch moment?" Axelrod tweeted on April 17. "After telling donors he's "doomed" unless he picks up with Latinos, Mitt puts kibosh on Kobach," a reference to POLITICO story reporting that a Romney spokeswoman had distanced the campaign from controversial immigration adviser Kris Kobach.

That was a day after a top West Winger went the other way during a briefing with national political reporters, unexpectedly rejecting the entire empty-core storyline and arguing that the real Romney was the 2012 conservative, and not the moderate, pro-choice Romney of the 1990s.

The aide's argument — which can't be recounted here because of the strict no-quotes, no names ground rules the White House imposes on such sessions — set off alarms among the White House press corps, political cadaver dogs paid to sniff nearly imperceptible changes in tone and language. Reporters, who can be quoted under the rules, harrumphed.

"He has a core now! You said he didn't have a core — are you saying he has a core now?" asked an incredulous TV network correspondent.



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