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## Mitt Romney's George W. Bush problem

By JONATHAN MARTIN | 10/3/12 4:22 AM EDT

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DENVER — It's a matter of when, not if, President Barack Obama turns to Mitt Romney at the first face-off here Wednesday night and repeats some variation of the same line the president and his campaign have used all year: Mitt, electing you would mean a return to the same policies that got us into this financial mess in the first place.

The attack is Obama's carefully tested way of saying that Romney would represent a third term for George W. Bush and the 43rd president's hands-off approach to taxes, spending and regulation that, in the incumbent's words, "led to the crisis."

If not as directly, Obama is attempting to put a Bush mask on Romney in exactly the same fashion as he did with devastating success to John McCain four years ago. It's not as blunt as FDR still running against Hooverism four years into the New Deal, but the bloody-shirt waving has served to remind voters of the recent Republican unpleasantness — and left conservatives confounded that their nominee not only hasn't rebutted the charge but also isn't attempting to turn the tables and run against both recent presidents.

Polling suggests that such a strategy of "triangulation," as it was termed when Bill Clinton sought to separate himself from his own party and the opposition, isn't an option but a necessity: 62 percent of self-described moderates said that they blamed Bush and the Republicans for the country's economic troubles while just 30 percent of the same voters faulted Obama and the Democrats, according to a CNN poll last month.

Indicting both parties for America's fiscal problems would help Romney detach himself from Bush and buy a measure of credibility with voters fed up with Washington. And given the remorse many conservatives have about the spending that took place under the last administration and the GOP base's immense desire to oust Obama, it seems unlikely that Romney would lose many Republican loyalists in the course of trying to appeal to swing voters.

"Doing so would be smart in two ways," said Cato Institute's Michael Tanner of making twin villains of Bush and Obama. "It would blunt Obama's attacks on Romney wanting to return to the Bush policy. And it would help rally those tea party folks who don't think much of Bush or the Republican establishment. "

Anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist said that “the speech writes itself.”

“The good news for a modern Republican is that you can criticize Bush and Obama and you are criticizing the pre-tea party, pre-focus on spending, pre-explosion of governor talent, pre-demonizing of earmarks GOP [while] attacking Obama is attacking the modern Democratic Party,” Norquist said. “Bush’s failures were the failure of the unreformed GOP that did not focus on spending.”

And, Republicans note, as a former governor, Romney has no record of votes supporting Bush’s agenda so Obama couldn’t hold up the number of times the GOP standard-bearer lined up with the last Republican president the way he did to McCain.

The editors of the two most influential conservative magazines have in recent weeks sounded the alarm on the need for Romney to create some space between himself and Bush.

William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, highlighted a survey from Republican pollster David Winston revealing that more voters, 48 percent, blamed “the policies of the past” for today’s economy than did “the policies of the present,” 45 percent.

Such data “suggest[s] the limitations of the Romney campaign’s referendum-on-the-past-four-years, pretend-Bush-didn’t-exist, and stingy-with-the-details-about-the-future approach,” Kristol wrote, adding that “the financial collapse under Bush remains a big problem for Romney.”

National Review’s Rich Lowry, in a separate piece, wrote that “it’s important for [Romney] to get some separation, or at least make it clearer what he thinks were the wheat and the chaff in the Bush years.’

“Both campaigns are arguing that the other candidate’s program has been tried and failed,” wrote Lowry (who also writes a weekly column for *POLITICO*). “Obama tries to answer Romney’s version of this argument, but I’m not sure Romney really tries to rebut Obama’s at all.”

And National Review last week editorialized that Romney has not addressed “the major problem he has in making his case [to middle-class voters]: the shadow of the George W. Bush years.”

To date, Romney has done little to convince voters that he’d be markedly different than Bush or even traditional Republican orthodoxy. The most memorable example from the whole year may have come in a single line from Romney’s running mate, rather than the nominee.

“In a clean break from the Obama years, and frankly from the years before this president, we will keep federal spending at 20 percent of GDP or less,” Paul Ryan pledged at the GOP convention in Tampa, perhaps attempting to atone somewhat for his own congressional record of supporting Bush.

Romney’s campaign, while not ruling out the possibility of taking on both parties, indicated that they don’t feel haunted by the ghost of Dubya.

“I don’t see this as [a] race being framed as between Bush and Obama,” said Romney senior adviser Kevin Madden. “The two names on the ballot are Mitt Romney and Barack Obama and there’s a very clear choice between the two. This last phase of the campaign is going to be about how we set the country on a better course going forward.”

Privately, though, some in Romneyland who believe Bush has done enduring damage to the GOP brand are nudging the candidate to, at least implicitly, separate himself from the last Republican in the White House.

“Stay tuned,” said one longtime Romney adviser when asked why they weren’t faulting both parties for the economic and the paralysis in the capital.

Some conservatives believe there’s a way for the former Massachusetts governor to do so without directly pointing at Bush.

“He hasn’t been willing to say what he probably actually believes, which is that we’ve had a lot of problems building that Obama has either not solved or made worse,” said National Review editor and Bloomberg columnist Ramesh Ponnuru. “If you use that argument, it’s, No. 1, more plausible than saying everything went to hell in 2009 and everything was fine before then. Two, it’s what he believes, I think. And third, it’s something that achieves separation from Bush without explicitly repudiating him. You don’t have to say his name, you just say, “We’ve had these problems for some time and talk about the dysfunctional Tax Code, dysfunctional health care system and dysfunctional entitlements we haven’t tackled.”

Such rhetoric wouldn’t be new for the Republican hopeful — he launched a similar offensive in his first presidential campaign.

What puzzles some longtime Romney-watchers is why, this late in the election, he has made no attempt to reprise in 2012 form his short-lived strategy of running as a “Republican for change.”

It’s now largely lost to history but in the fall of 2007, Romney used a high-profile speech to Michigan Republicans and a simultaneous ad campaign to run against his own beleaguered party.

“I think we’d have to admit that the blame doesn’t all belong to the other party,” Romney said on Mackinac Island just over five years ago. “We Republicans have to put our own house in order. We can’t be like Democrats — the party of big spenders. We can’t pretend that our border is secure from illegal immigration. We can’t have ethical standards that are the punch line for Jay Leno. When Republicans act like Democrats, America loses.”

Citing the botched response to Hurricane Katrina, Romney said: “I want to bring accountability back to Washington.”

Much of this language would, of course, have to be adjusted to reflect a different campaign at a different time. But Romney’s indictment of Washington could be more effective now than it was when he was gingerly trying to win his party’s nomination at a time when Bush was still in office.

Consider what he said about the administration’s failure — a year before the financial collapse — to act on the subprime credit crisis: “Their job is to warn consumers and to warn lenders. They didn’t do their job. But you know what Congress will do in Washington? They’ll probably appropriate more money for them for the future. You know what should happen? Heads should roll.”

If Romney could use such tough language about business as usual under both parties in the midst of a GOP primary, why isn’t he deploying it in a general election five years on, when he’s desperately trying to sway independent voters who are disdainful of Washington?