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## Down the Final Stretch -- Age versus Race

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And then there were two.

In a campaign historically rife with isms, sexism was knocked out in the preliminaries. Now there is just racism and ageism.

Which one is going to play the biggest role in the final sprint to the campaign finish line?

We would like to think that the answer is "neither." We know better.

McCain's age problem is part fact -- he's old -- and part comparison -- Obama is not.

Compounding his problem is his steady stream of reminders. When 24-7 media clamps down on a chew toy, it is always there to say "look everybody -- he did it again."

There are his sodden, scripted deliveries -- eyes constantly flicking down for reminders from his talking points, odd little smile - more like a grimace -- flashing on cue. There are the gaffs -- Iraq's border with Pakistan; his flummoxed non-response to why Viagra is covered by insurance and birth control isn't; his admitted ignorance of all things Internet -- including e-mail.

And there are times when he comes off as the neighborhood mean old man, snarling: "get that dog off of my lawn!"

He has come back manfully with self-deprecation using lines like "I'm older than dirt and have more scars than Frankenstein." But Ronald Reagan did it first, and did it better. And besides, he had thick black hair, chopped wood with his shirt off, and people called him Ronnie. He was ageless..

The point of this week's attack ad comparing Obama to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton was supposed to be experience. The powerful subtext was age difference.

Comparing the talents of Obama with two fluffy, siliconed train wrecks is waved off with a flick of the wrist. But the fact is, the HOV lane to celebrity in America is to be young, sexy and interesting. It is the business of creating draw and excitement. It's what brings 200,000 Germans

to come out to hear from a candidate from another country.

McCain, unfortunately has none of that draw and even less of the excitement. He is dressing tired ideas in a baggy blue suit that is frayed at the cuffs. He is presenting himself as the alternative to the unknown at a time when America is less afraid of the unknown than it is more of the past eight years.

Race is more subtle and volatile. Nobody will bother to say they are age blind. We will, however, say we are color blind. And some portion of us -- we'll never really know how many -- are lying. Even at the moment of truth in the voting booth, we may not know ourselves.

Earnest statements that this campaign is not about race have repeatedly slammed headlong into evidence that it is very much about race.

Start this morning and work back.

Obama started it when he said his opponents would try to make Americans fear him because: "... he doesn't look like all of those other presidents on the dollar bills." McCain indignantly fired back, and Obama said he wasn't talking about McCain -- rather right-wing radio (we'll skip past the fact that nobody listening to right wing radio is going to vote for a Democrat of any color.)

Also in the current news cycle, Obama had to head-slap the black-rapper Ludicris for insulting McCain, George Bush and Hillary Clinton in a song that urged black support Obama's candidacy.

Before that, came Senator Joe Biden's observation that Obama is "clean." There was Bill Clinton's Jesse Jackson comparison in South Carolina; and Hillary Clinton telling 60 minutes Obama is not a Muslim ... "as far as I know." There was Rev. Wright spewing hatred for America and Obama's political history-making response. There was the *New Yorker* magazine's cartoon cover with the Obamas in turban and afro, carrying an AK-47 and burning the flag. We can go all the way back to Geraldine Ferraro pronouncing that Obama wouldn't even be in the race if he was white.

The list goes on, and so will the issue of race.

White Americans have never before had the choice of a black American for the nation's top job. Race -- for best of reasons and the worst -- is going to hover over that decision.

And let's be clear. There are pros in the game that are going to make sure that it does. With black Americans traditionally voting Democratic in the mid-90s percent range, they have nothing to lose. And they are good at what they do.

So in the final puts and takes of race versus age, race is the winner. The unfortunate fact is that for many -- and we don't know how many -- race simply offers more to fear.