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OPINION

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Kerry in bad taste

My oldest son is serving his second tour in Iraq, and I found Sen. Kerry's "joke" in bad taste and far from humorous. His unwillingness and inability to offer an unqualified apology illustrates what so many Americans realized in 2004 — that this man was not the best choice for the presidency.

What I found truly ironic is that Kerry prides himself in having cultivated a French-style diplomacy, while in reality he is nothing more than an "ugly American" (as he often paints President Bush). It comes down to uttering two simple words — I'm sorry.

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Kerry, Bush trade barbs
Comments at PCC spark president's ire

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WASHINGTON - The White House and Sen. John Kerry traded their harshest accusations since the 2004 presidential race on Tuesday, with President Bush accusing the Democrat of troop-bashing and Kerry calling the president's men hacks who are "willing to lie."

The war of words, tough even for this hard-fought campaign season, came after Kerry was quoted telling a group of Pasadena City College students on Monday that those unable to navigate the country's education system "get stuck in Iraq."

Kerry was speaking during a campaign rally for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Phil Angelides. The comment spread like political wildfire on conservative and GOP-linked Web sites, became a much-viewed video on Youtube.com, and the battle was drawn.

The two parties are searching for any edge amid indications Democrats could take back the House and possibly win control of the Senate in next week's midterm elections. Though neither Bush nor Kerry is on any ballot, the bitterness with which they fought each other as 2004 rivals spilled over as both campaign hard for their parties in a race shaped in large measure by public doubts about the Iraq war.

As Republicans demanded that Kerry apologize, a Democratic congressional candidate in a close race in Iowa canceled a campaign event with Kerry, saying the senator's comments were inappropriate.

White House press secretary Tony Snow was asked about Kerry's comment at his regular briefing with reporters, and had clearly come prepared with a lengthy attack. He said the quote "fits a pattern" of negative remarks about U.S. soldiers from the decorated Vietnam veteran and suggested that whether Democratic candidates - particularly those running on their military service backgrounds - agree with their 2004 standard-bearer should be a campaign litmus test.

Bush, campaigning later in Georgia, said Kerry's statement was "insulting and it is shameful."

"The members of the United States military are plenty smart and they are plenty brave and the senator from Massachusetts owes them an apology," Bush said during an appearance for a former GOP congressman, Mac Collins, who is trying to oust Democratic Rep. Jim Marshall. There were boos at the mention of Kerry's name and cheers at Bush's call for an apology.

Kerry, who is considering another run for the White House in 2008, angrily fired back.

At a hastily arranged news conference in Seattle, Kerry said: "I apologize to no one for my criticism of the president and of his broken policy."

Kerry said the comment in question was "a botched joke about the president and the president's people, not about the troops ... and they know that's what I was talking about."

He opened his speech at PCC with several one-liners, saying at one point that Bush had lived in Texas but now "lives in a state of denial."

He then said: "You know, education, if you make the most of it, you study hard, you do your homework and you make an effort to be smart, you can do well. If you don't, you get stuck in Iraq."

That, Kerry said, was meant as a reference to Bush, not troops. Kerry said it is the president who owes U.S. soldiers an apology - for "a Katrina foreign policy" that misled the country into war in Iraq, failed to adequately study and plan for the aftermath, has not properly equipped troops and has expanded the terrorist threat.

"I'm sick and tired of a bunch of despicable Republicans who will not debate real policy, who won't take responsibility for their own mistakes, standing up and trying to make other people the butt of those mistakes," he said. "It disgusts me that a bunch of these Republican hacks who've never worn the uniform of our country are willing to lie about those who did."

Unsubstantiated allegations about Kerry's Vietnam War heroism from a group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth figured prominently in the 2004 Kerry-Bush race.

Other Republicans issued demands for an apology from Kerry.

GOP Sen. John McCain, like Kerry a decorated Vietnam veteran and a potential 2008 rival, said while campaigning for Republican candidates in Indiana that "the suggestion that only the least educated Americans would agree to serve in the military and fight in Iraq is an insult to every soldier serving in combat today."

Added House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., struggling to keep his party in control of Congress: "Our soldiers risk their lives in the face of grave dangers on the battlefield, and no one who chooses to courageously and selflessly defend our country can be considered 'uneducated.'"