Column: Romney tax return issue won’t go away

Posted: Wednesday, August 15, 2012 8:36 am

Carl Golden Syndicated columnist

In the summer and fall of 1993, I served as press secretary for the gubernatorial campaign of Christie Todd Whitman of New Jersey. Anyone who was around then will recall the issue — virtually the only issue — that year was the $2.8 billion income and sales tax increase signed into law three years previously by Gov. Jim Florio.

But, just as Mitt Romney has been knocked off balance and off message by demands he release more than 10 years of his personal income tax returns, the Whitman campaign was thrust into the center of political and media turmoil after the candidate and her husband released three years of returns but withheld one year.

That one year became the focus of the Florio campaign and from reporters who'd heard enough about tax increases and demanded to know what was in the return the Whitmans refused to release.

Her campaign consultant was Ed Rollins, a battle-hardened veteran of political battles, including serving as President Reagan’s campaign manager in 1984.

Rollins and I spent untold hours discussing the media clamor for the missing return, a clamor stoked daily by Florio’s consultant, James Carville, a personal friend of Rollins. Carville was absolutely manic about the tax return, taking to talk radio and seizing every opportunity to suggest to reporters that refusing to disclose it meant the Whitmans were hiding something embarrassing and harmful to her campaign.

Rollins and I understood the missing return was dominating the debate; Rollins’ experience told him it would continue to dog Whitman while I took the telephone calls each day demanding an explanation for why the return was being kept secret.

The issue we wanted — Florio’s tax increases — was in danger of being swept aside by a refusal to release one tax return.

Romney confronts the same problem. President Obama’s campaign continues to challenge him, feeding into the President’s campaign narrative that Romney amassed his fortune as head of the private equity firm Bain Capital where he bankrupted companies, cost thousands of American jobs and shipped others overseas all the while suggesting that his millions in profits went into Swiss or other offshore bank accounts to avoid paying income tax in the United States.

Obama has tied the two together and dared Romney to untie them by releasing the last decade’s worth of tax returns.

The Republican has resisted, arguing that his returns from 2010 and 2011 are sufficient to let the American people know that he is a successful businessman and that he’s paid his fair share of taxes.

He’s losing the argument, though, just as Whitman, Rollins and I were losing it 19 years ago. Voter distrust of politicians runs deep and, propelled by heated campaign rhetoric, the “something to hide” argument finds a receptive audience, particularly when the debates involves loaded phrases like “Swiss bank accounts” or “tax havens in the Caymans” — code words for tax cheat.

Leading Republicans, editorial writers, and even the conservative Bible National Review have urged Romney to release the returns, but to no avail. While Romney may hope that delay will make the issue fade, the life it’s taken on can only be extinguished by public disclosure. Media appetites are whetted, not satisfied, by being denied information it wants.
Obama, his surrogates and the Super Pacs supporting him will continue to relentlessly drive the issue. It turns the debate to what they want and keeps it away from what they don’t want, just as the Florio campaign attempted in 1993.

The Whitmans ultimately recognized the peril of maintaining the no-release posture. The return was disclosed, revealing a one-time income spike. It turned out to be a dud, generating a one day story and disappearing. It was accomplished early enough in the process that Whitman could redirect the campaign debate to Florio’s record, his tax increases and her proposal to cut income tax rates.

If Romney hopes to make headway attacking Obama’s less than stellar stewardship of the American economy, he must put the tax return issue to rest; to, as consultants are fond of saying, “stop the bleeding.”

Whitman defeated Florio in 1993 by an exceptionally thin margin of some 27,000 votes, becoming the first female Governor in the state’s history. How many of those were influenced by the release of the disputed tax return is impossible to divine. And, there was no desire to find out.

*Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. You can reach him at cgolden1937@gmail.*