

POLITICS AND THE MEDIA: DOES CAMPAIGN COVERAGE DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD?

By: Tom Fiedler, Political Editor, *The Miami Herald*

(Tom Fiedler wrote two recent columns for *The Miami Herald* that dealt with a similar theme. At the request of Florida TaxWatch, Fiedler has granted permission for the reprinting and combining of portions of both columns.)

The gravelly voice on my answering machine was familiar and full of cheer and, as his voice barked at me, I could envision the unlit cigar clamped in the corner of his mouth.

"I read your article in the paper today," former Florida Senate President and former Florida TaxWatch President Phil Lewis of Palm Beach said, "and I just wanted to tell you that I hardly agree with a word in it. Please call me."

Who can resist such an invitation, especially from someone I rate among the state's wisest men? He was nettled by a story I had written about the potential for political abuse of Florida's newly passed health-care reform program. In particular, I had reported that some analysts were wary that the political credentials of a few people appointed to administer this \$7 billion-a-year program were far lengthier than their professional ones.

"A step above pond slime," is the way State Sen. Ken Jenne, D-Fort Lauderdale, described some of these political appointees.

Wise Phil Lewis was not pleased with such a blunderbuss smear. "You guys already make it hard enough for good people to serve," he said, chewing on me along with his cigar. "Now you've got everybody who has volunteered to serve on these boards wondering if Jenne was referring to them."

The point of Lewis' "sermon," as he called it, was that I needed to lighten up. I needed to stop viewing the world so cynically, to stop imputing dark motives to people who -- until I could prove otherwise -- may have no other interest at heart than the commonweal.

It was, I had to admit, a point well taken. And it came just in time to put atop my list of New Year's resolutions.

So here it is: In 1994, I will try to be less cynical about politicians and politics. I will try to curb any rush to judgment about a candidate's motives or actions. I will try to let their words and deeds stand on their own, rather than inserting my own "yes, but..." into so many reports.

And, in covering this year's elections, I will try yet again to concentrate my attention on issues that matter as public policy -- like taxes and spending and solutions to crime and education -- rather than those that matter only as "so's-your-mother" rhetoric, the stuff that makes for a cheap headline, but is irrelevant to Florida's future.

Negative Publicity

Syracuse University Professor Thomas E. Patterson, one of the clearest thinkers I know, draws up perhaps the most damning indictment ever of the modern news media's coverage of elections in a new book, *Out of Order*.

"I am particularly critical of the type of adversarial journalism that faults everything the candidates do," he wrote. "The news media have failed in their responsibility to think through the limits of adversarial reporting. Where should criticism begin and end? Journalists have no clear answer to this question and are inclined to criticize almost everything the candidates do.

"The result is that candidates must try to communicate with an electorate that has been told by the press to distrust everything they say. It's not a healthy situation."

Patterson is not naive. He acknowledges that the news media have an obligation to expose a candidate's deceit and to criticize muddled thinking. But, he adds, "the press has gone way beyond that point," seeming to honor negativity for its own sake.

Over the past generation, Patterson shows that the news media have increasingly portrayed presidential candidates as unworthy of the office. In 1960, news references

to both John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the candidates that year, were favorable 75% of the time.

By 1992, more than 60% of the references to Bill Clinton and George Bush cast them in an unfavorable light. Only a fool would argue that this was because Clinton and Bush were somehow less worthy, less honorable than Kennedy and Nixon.

Little wonder that voters adopt a "plague on both their houses" attitude – and many flocked to independent H. Ross Perot.

Politicians turned off

"There are no concerns for the nominee's emotions,
his or her needs, his or her feelings,
and unfortunately, not even for the nominee's level of competence."
-- Stanley Tate

The problem goes beyond elections, as Bobby Ray Inman illustrated when he walked stunningly away from the nomination to be secretary of defense. We can ponder all we want whether there was some hidden reason motivating the retired four-star admiral, but the words that struck most true, the words that cut to the core of his reasoning, were remarkably simple: "I just don't need this..."

I think we make a mistake to simply attribute this incident to a whining prima donna and then move on, business as usual, preparing to grind up the next soul nominated to fill his space.

Inman's disdain for the process has been too widely shared to continue on without reflection. Broken by it have been any number of smart, highly motivated and, yes, patriotic people who were naive enough to let their names enter the political sphere.

One that comes quickly to mind is South Florida's own Stanley Tate, a man whose intelligence and character were never questioned until his name was proffered to lead the agency charged with cleaning up the savings and loan debacle, who used words similar to Inman's in quitting his fight.

"The nominee is both dispensable and disposable," Tate wrote in a letter to Clinton explaining his decision. "There are no concerns for the nominee's emotions, his or her needs, his or her feelings, and unfortunately, not even for the nominee's level of

competence. It is a process that serves all Americans poorly, and in my opinion, it was a devastating experience."

Even more tragic is the memory of White House counsel Vincent Foster Jr., who, after suffering daily torments from *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial writers and the rest of Washington's professional hit teams, put a gun to his head and ended it all.

In a wrenching suicide note, he shed light on his motivation: "I am not meant for the job or the spotlight of public life in Washington where ruining people is considered sport."

And, for every one of these people who have seen their interest in public service end bitterly or horribly, there are thousands upon thousands who shrink from the very idea of being considered because, in that mantra, "I just don't need this ..."

It's not enough that we require even volunteers to forfeit much of their privacy by disclosing their sources of income and their net worths. It's not enough that we surround them with ethics statutes designed to guard against those few who would loot the public purse.

We now throw them into an environment seemingly designed from the outset to be antagonistic, as if we were putting them through the political equivalent of a humiliating fraternity hazing.

Some might argue that this is ultimately beneficial, a kind of Darwinian selection process in which the strong survive and the weak succumb. Perhaps that would be true if everyone were required to go through it. But what about those who, like Inman or Tate, simply decide they don't want the grief? The very people we should want volunteering their talents to serve us all are taking a pass.

Clearly, we want people with sensitivity to enter government. And we want people of accomplishment, which almost always means accumulated controversy. And, as often as Americans don't like it, they appreciate the news media's ability to dig into a prospective public servant's background, character and record.

Criticism without Ridicule

The real answer here seems to be that we are in desperate need of old-fashioned civility and decency. We need, as Jack Kemp said recently, to be able to treat people with respect even while publicly "hating" their ideas. We in the news media must practice criticism without ridicule.

In his new book, Patterson also documented another trend in journalism. Call it self-adulation. In 1960, 65% of all news stories focused on the candidates' words and just 35% focused on the journalists' views. But by 1992, fully 80% of all the stories filed focused on the journalists themselves.



**"Election coverage has become a barrier between the candidates and the voters rather than a bridge connecting them."
-- Thomas E. Patterson**

And Patterson finds mountains of evidence to support another charge that the news media have paid increasing attention to personal attacks and less to policy differences. Thus we all knew about Gennifer with a "G" and Jennifer with a "J" in the 1992 campaign, but few of us knew the different approaches Bush and Clinton would take in dealing with health care reform.

The point he makes is fundamentally important: "This type of election reporting weakens the bond between the candidates and the voters ... The evidence leaves no doubt that the change in the tone of election coverage has contributed to the decline in the public's confidence in those who seek the presidency.

"Election coverage has become a barrier between the candidates and the voters rather than a bridge connecting them."

In some perverse ways, the news media have succeeded only too well. For years we have been telling voters how unsavory the political process is and how unworthy its participants. Now, sad to say, they have come to believe us.

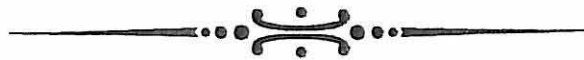
But we, too, are paying a price. Patterson cites numerous studies showing that people are becoming hardened to our jaundiced journalism. Like the fable of the little boy crying wolf, we have cried "pond slime" too often.

Says Patterson: "When the media do make an allegation worthy of the public's concern, people only half-listen and half-believe." He cites polls taken at the conclusion of the 1988 and 1992 presidential campaigns that show the press is given an even lower rating as an information source than the candidates themselves, the talk shows, the debates and even the political ads.

My colleagues and I like to think that we are honest brokers in the marketplace. We make it our business to become expert in the ways of the candidates, then pass our judgment on to voters.

But, tragically, according to Patterson's research, those voters no longer trust what we say. They view us in the same light that cops regard stool pigeons, as self-interested purveyors of biased information. They take our information, but they don't really trust us and they surely don't like us.

So my New Year's resolution is to do what I can to re-establish that trust.



About the Author



Fiedler

Tom Fiedler, *The Miami Herald's* Political Editor and columnist, has been covering government and politics since 1972. Mr. Fiedler has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Boston University. Fiedler has covered the state capital bureau, the Carter White House, Congress and every presidential campaign since 1972. He has shared two Pulitzer Prizes and in 1988 won the Society of Professional Journalists' top award. Mr. Fiedler lives with his wife, Suzanne on Miami Beach. They have two daughters, Terri and Tiffany.

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About Florida TaxWatch

Florida TaxWatch is the only statewide organization entirely devoted to state taxing and spending issues in Florida. Since its inception in 1979, Florida TaxWatch has become widely recognized as the watchdog of citizens' hard-earned tax dollars. The nationally distributed *City and State* magazine in 1989 published a poll of the nation's statewide taxpayer research centers. Based on this poll, the publication cited Florida TaxWatch as one of the six most influential and respected taxpayer assistance institutes in the nation.

In recent years, news stories about Florida TaxWatch have run in all Florida newspapers, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. In addition, Florida TaxWatch has been featured on the prestigious *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* and several times in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Florida TaxWatch is a private, non-profit, non-partisan research institute supported entirely by voluntary, tax-deductible membership contributions and philanthropic foundation grants. Membership is open to any organization or individual interested in supporting a credible research effort that promotes positive change. Members, through their loyal support, help Florida TaxWatch to bring about an effective, responsive government that is accountable to the citizens it serves.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by all types of taxpayers -- homeowners, small businesses, large corporations, professional firms, labor unions, associations, individuals and philanthropic foundations -- representing a wide spectrum of Florida's citizens.

Florida TaxWatch is well-known and respected for its empirically sound research products which recommend productivity enhancements and explain statewide impact of economic and tax and spend policies and practices. Without lobbying, Florida TaxWatch has worked diligently and effectively to build government efficiency and promote responsible, cost-effective improvements that add value and benefit taxpayers.

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With your help, we will continue our diligence to make certain your tax investments are fair and beneficial to you, the taxpaying customer who supports Florida's government. Florida TaxWatch is ever present to ensure that taxes are equitable, not excessive, that their public benefits and costs are weighed, and that government agencies are more responsive and productive in their use of public funds.

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