

The Washington Post

November 6, 1989

Critics Lament 1989 As Another Season Of Slash-And-Burn Politics

By David S. Broder; Washington Post Staff Writer

Millicent Fenwick, the former Republican House member and onetime Senate candidate, has been watching the 1989 New Jersey gubernatorial campaign unfold on her home television set in Bernardsville. She sums it up in one word: "Deplorable.

The outspoken Fenwick said the campaign ads used by her former colleagues in the House, Reps. James J. Florio (D) and Jim Courter (R), now rivals for the governorship, "drag down the whole process. They make these charges and people never hear the rebuttals. The whole business of running for office is proving to be a terrible disappointment to the public."

Not everyone in politics agrees that the negativism of the ads and campaigns of 1989 is worrisome or even out of the ordinary. Brad O'Leary, the Washington-based president of the American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC), said he saw "nothing interesting or startling" being attempted in the races whose ads he's watched. James Ceaser, a political science professor at the University of Virginia, said the ads on the abortion issue in that state's gubernatorial race, which some have criticized as negative, "maybe could have been presented in a more delicate way . . . but they have been informative."

Nonetheless, the close of the 1989 campaign has brought another flood of complaints -- heard also in 1986 and 1988 -- about what critics call the slash-and-burn style of modern politics.

Considering how few contests have been held this year, candidates have been accused of a remarkable variety of sins. From slum-lording to tax-evading and from spouse abuse to toxic-waste pollution, assaults on the character of opponents have become standard fare. The most common charge of all, heard in almost every campaign this year from at least one side, is that the opposition is lying and distorting the record in its campaign ads. The ads themselves have become the issue.

In this respect, 1989 has taken up right where 1988 left off. Kiku Adatto, a Harvard University media researcher, has found that while excerpts from candidates' commercials appeared on the network evening news programs only three times in the 1968 presidential campaign, such excerpts were shown 126 times last year.

Members of the public, she said, are "becoming more theater reviewers than citizens."

In separate interviews, the chairmen of both political parties expressed concern. "I think they've been fairly harsh, fairly shrill," Republican National Chairman Lee Atwater said of the 1989 ads. "I think it's out of hand," agreed Democratic National Chairman Ronald H. Brown. "The public is fed up with the mudslinging."

But if that is the case, most political insiders and observers said, the public is going to have to make its feelings known more vehemently than it has in the past. Legislation has been proposed in Congress that would require any candidate who mentioned the opponent's name in commercials to appear personally on the screen to make the charges. But such bills are challenged as possible infringements on the First Amendment and appear to have dim prospects for passage.

As for the practitioners -- the campaign consultants and ad-makers -- they are frank to say they will not change their ways as long as the tactics work.

And they do work. Republican pollster Linda Divall said, "The only time I've seen it {a negative campaign} hurt the person running it is when the information is false or when it is used in a vicious way. Every other time, it works."

Polling experts say the negative messages work because they penetrate the clutter of competing ads. "They're more vivid than your standard biographical or issue ad," said Divall. "You see the trend not just in political ads but in business commercials. Ford tells you why they're better than Chevy; McDonald's asks to be compared to Burger King." She also noted the "increasing informational content of so-called negative ads. . . . Ad-makers are finding more and more effective ways to convey information in a quick fashion so it sticks in the mind."

Still, the technique is not risk-free. In New Jersey, it was Democrat Florio who hit his opponent first, and Florio is well ahead in all the final preelection polls. In Virginia, on the other hand, Republican J. Marshall Coleman landed the first punch on Democrat L. Douglas Wilder, and Coleman is the underdog in Tuesday's voting, with some observers saying he has been hurt by criticism of his ads.

Atwater, who managed President Bush's 1988 campaign in which Bush ads targeted the Massachusetts prison furlough program, the pollution in Boston harbor and Michael Dukakis's veto of a Pledge of Allegiance bill, said, "When a candidate runs a real negative campaign, it has a 100 percent chance of backfiring." He said he would bet that Tuesday's voting will show that "the side that has been most successful in portraying the other side as negative will win" every race.

By Atwater's definition, the Bush effort "wasn't a negative campaign." But Brown, the Democratic chairman, does not agree. "The Atwaters of the world have lived and died on negative campaigning for a long time," Brown said. "They almost gloat about coming up with 'wedge issues.' There's no moral underpinning at all."

Clearly, what constitutes a negative campaign lies in the eye of the beholder. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., the historian and Democratic activist, said that while the campaigns of 1988 and 1989 "are worse than those of the recent past, they certainly aren't worse than those of the 19th century." He said the campaign excesses of the 19th century grew so offensive that "the Progressive movement came along to elevate politics." But even in the Progressive era, he noted, "Teddy Roosevelt was pretty good at calling people names." It may take some kind of basic change in the political climate to alter the kind of campaigns candidates run, many insiders agree. But for now, the AAPC's O'Leary said his member-consultants believe that what they choose to call "comparative advertising," rather than negative, "is fair game. If advertising is unfair," he said, "the press and TV will let us know."

But the media have been reluctant to play traffic cop on campaign ads. Harvard's Adatto said that "the reporter addressed the veracity of the commercial's claims less than 8

percent of the time" in the 126 network news broadcasts last year that excerpted commercials. "Those news programs," she said, "largely became an additional billboard for the candidate."

Throwing up his hands at the futility of other remedies, Democratic pollster Peter D. Hart said, "If the voters all said to the pollsters, 'This is repulsive. I can't stand it, and I won't vote for the candidate who does it,' that's the end of negative commercials. But now the candidates see that positive ads don't move the numbers and negative ads do, so they keep on doing it."

Hart, who is concentrating on non-political business in 1989, added, "I'm just glad my hands are clean of the muck this year."