Media Man

BY ED HARDY

Campaign ads can win elections, says political scientist Darrell West, but when TV spots get too vicious, they cost the public trust

It's October of 1992. The presidential election is only weeks away, and weary voters are elbowing through the charges and counter-charges of another largely negative and seemingly endless presidential campaign. Did Bill Clinton inhale? Was George Bush really out of the Iran-Contra loop? Did Ross Perot actually leave the U.S. Navy because he couldn't stand his shipmates' foul language?

On TV the attack ads have come down off the shelf. The Bush campaign charges that "100 leading economists" say Clinton's economic plan will bring on huge deficits and higher taxes. The Democrats come up with "nine Nobel-Prize-winning economists" who say that's wrong.

Against this backdrop, a *Time*/CNN poll finds that 75 percent of Americans believe there is less honesty in government than there was ten years earlier. Sixty-three percent have little or no confidence that their leaders generally tell the truth.

"In recent elections there's been a terrible hangover effect from campaigns," says Darrell West, associate professor of political science. "The ads have been so negative that voters feel turned off by politics. It creates a sense that politics is a nasty business."

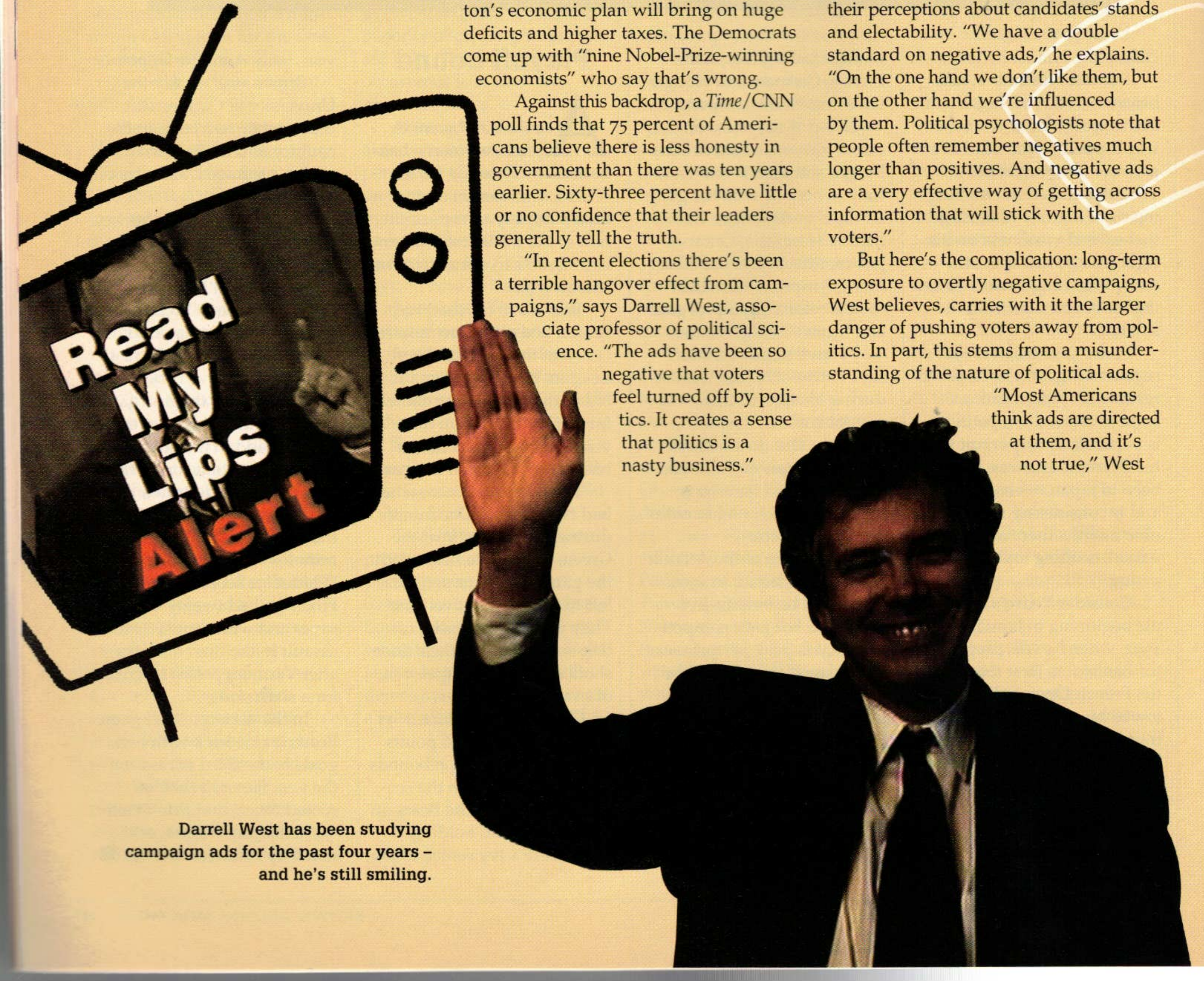
West's new book, *Air Wars* (published by Congressional Quarterly Press), takes a detailed look at four decades of political advertising on television.

"People assume that attacks on character are new, [but] they're as American as apple pie," West says. He points out that negative campaigning had its start in the early years of the Republic and that it has stayed around for a good reason: It works.

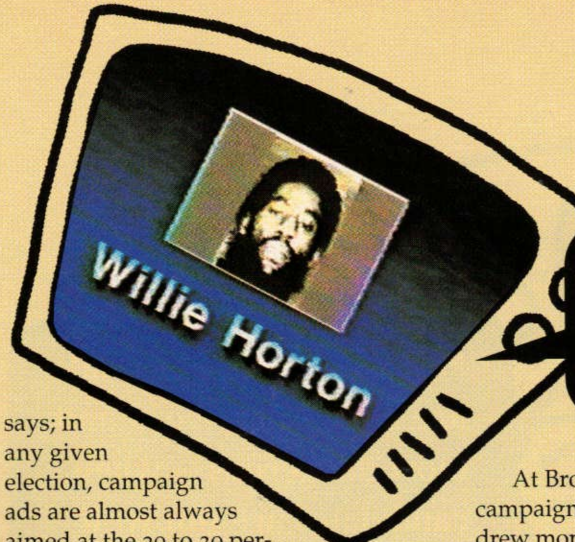
West's research argues that, while voters may not *like* negative campaigns, exposure to negative ads can change their perceptions about candidates' stands and electability. "We have a double standard on negative ads," he explains. "On the one hand we don't like them, but on the other hand we're influenced by them. Political psychologists note that people often remember negatives much longer than positives. And negative ads are a very effective way of getting across information that will stick with the voters."

But here's the complication: long-term exposure to overtly negative campaigns, West believes, carries with it the larger danger of pushing voters away from politics. In part, this stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of political ads.

"Most Americans think ads are directed at them, and it's not true," West



Darrell West has been studying campaign ads for the past four years – and he's still smiling.



The 1988 contest proved once and for all that ads can decide elections

says; in any given election, campaign ads are almost always aimed at the 20 to 30 percent of voters who have not yet made up their minds. "They're not addressing the concerns of the majority, they're addressing the concerns of small groups of undecided voters, which is the reason many Americans feel that politics and politicians don't address their concerns," West says.

"The long-term danger is really quite extreme," he cautions. "It's when people lose faith in politicians and lose confidence in the ability of political systems to address fundamental problems that they turn to saviors.

"On some level this is similar to what Russia is experiencing right now," West says, pointing to the strong showing of ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky in that country's recent elections. With Russia's political and economic reforms causing upheaval, Zhirinovsky promised that he alone could bring the country back from the brink. "He was great on television and used a lot of advertising," West says.

Darrell West's small, first-floor office is near the back of Prospect House, across the street from Carrie Tower. Bookcases run to the ceiling, and several chairs are piled high with advance copies of political science books waiting to be doled out to reviewers. (He is also the book review editor for the journal *Congress and the Presidency*.)

West came to Brown in 1982 after finishing his doctorate at Indiana University. He has always been interested in the mechanics of politics – even while growing up on a farm in Ohio. In fact, he says, the subject was unavoidable. His father was a township supervisor, and the how and why of local elections was standard conversational fare at the dinner table.

At Brown West teaches a course on campaigns and elections that last fall drew more than 220 students. This spring he's leading a seminar on politics and the mass media. And for the past six years, he has directed the John Hazen White Sr. Public Opinion Laboratory, which conducts statewide political surveys.

Air Wars is West's third academic book, and putting it together took roughly four years. "I've always been interested in elections," he says, "and more and more it became apparent that you can't really study elections without studying the media, and then studying television advertising. Basically I wanted to study the three different parts of it: the ad itself, media coverage of the ad, and then viewer reactions."

"A lot of the interesting work that's been done so far on campaign ads has simply been tracking their history," says Robert Shapiro, associate professor of political science at Columbia. "Darrell is the first person to offer a synthesis concerning what difference ads do make in terms of voters' appraisals and reactions. [*Air Wars*] is the kind of book that everyone who will be studying these things in the future will have to take as one of their starting points."

Today two-thirds of the average presidential campaign budget goes to TV ads, West says – more than twice the percentage that went to TV and radio in a 1952 campaign. A lot has changed during those years. For one, party allegiances have weakened. Thirty years ago, more than 75 percent of voters called themselves Democrats or Republicans; today, less than 60 percent of voters align themselves with one of the two major parties.

In addition, the process by which delegates are selected has been revamped. It moved out of the back rooms and into a presidential primary system that was expanded during the early 1970s. Unable to rely on party allegiance and machine politics to capture elections, candidates needed a better way to reach into the living rooms of ordinary voters. They found it in television. Yet even as political ads became more common, conventional campaign wisdom still held that TV ads alone would never decide a national election.

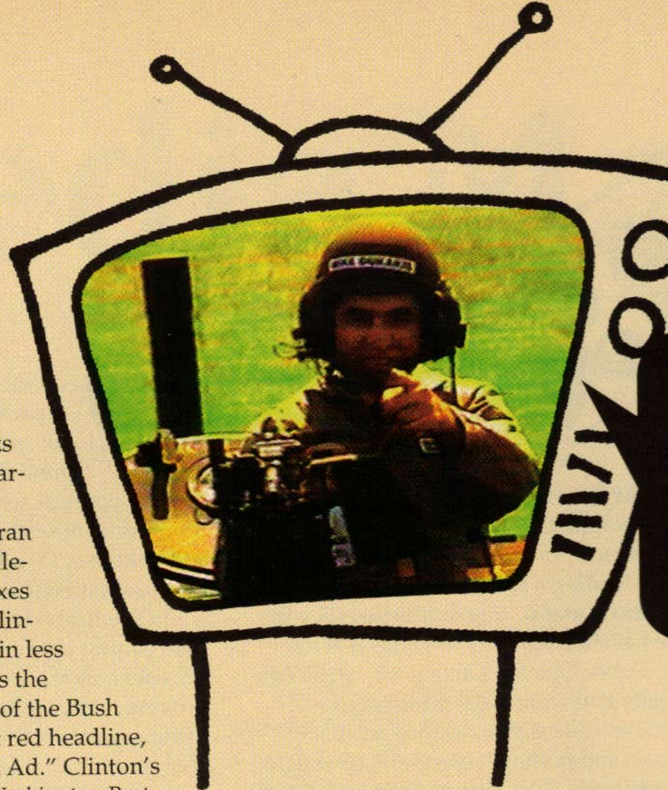
In political advertising circles, the 1988 contest between George Bush and Michael Dukakis is remembered for disproving that long-held axiom. "It was a turning point, in the sense that it proved once and for all that ads can be decisive in elections," West says.

Using news reports about Willie Horton, who had committed rape while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison, the Bush campaign created the famous "revolving door" ad. This spot blamed Dukakis for the furlough program, suggesting that the governor was soft on crime. The Republicans went on to paint Dukakis as a big-spending, tax-raising, weak-on-defense liberal who didn't particularly like the Pledge of Allegiance.

The success of the anti-Dukakis ads was due in part to the Democrats' failure to counterattack, but also to the media's failure to scrutinize the Republican message. "The Bush campaign was able to get the media to accept [its] message basically carte blanche," West says, "even though there were a lot of voters who said, 'Wait a minute. Where are the big issues? This campaign is about much more than flags, furloughs, and patriotism.'"

Misleading campaign ads, West points out, are most effective – and most dangerous – in situations where candidates are not well known. "That really was Dukakis's problem," West says. "He was one of the least-known nominees of a major party in the post-World War II period. And that allowed Bush to quite effectively create this negative impression of him."

Yet four years later, the Bush campaign failed when it tried those same tactics against another little-known Democratic governor, Arkansas's Bill Clinton. One factor, West says, was "the 800-pound issue of the economy,"



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which every 1992 candidate had to address. In addition, unlike the Dukakis team, the Clinton campaign responded immediately to attacks on the candidate's character and record. For instance, when Bush ran an ad depicting middle-class voters whose taxes "might" rise under Clinton's economic plan, in less than forty-eight hours the Democrats ran a clip of the Bush spot under the bright red headline, "George Bush Attack Ad." Clinton's ad then quoted the *Washington Post,* which had called the Bush ad "misleading." Voters began to blame Republicans for the overall shrill tone of the race, West says.

Also, by 1992 the news media had changed their approach to covering campaign advertising. "They felt they'd been had by Bush in '88 and they resolved never to let that happen again," West says. During the 1988 election the press had developed the concept of ad watches – news reports that analyzed campaign ads shortly after they aired. By 1992 ad watches were regular features in most major newspapers, on CNN, and on the network news. Often the day after a candidate's television ad first aired, newspaper readers would find the text of that ad laid out beside a point-by-point analysis of its claims. Television news operations typically ran portions of ads in a small box on the screen and superimposed commentary.

The 1992 ad watches were rigorous, unlike some 1988 reports that had inadvertently increased the impact of the spots. In those early reports, "[news programs] would run an ad full screen and then do a mild critique," West says. "But focus groups suggested that viewers remembered the ad and not the critique." In 1992 the networks "were much more aggressive in reporting on candidate claims," he says. "Which was a change that Bill Clinton understood immediately, and George Bush never did figure out."

Anticipating media scrutiny, "Clinton was very careful about documenting the claims in his ads," West says. "He'd have a claim and on the bottom of the screen there'd be a little footnote. It kind of reinforced the message that Bush was playing loose with the facts."

West believes ad watches will play a critical role in curbing the excesses of future political campaigns. "Follow-up reporting by the news media would enable viewers to link ad sponsorship with responsibility," he writes in *Air Wars.* "Journalists who aggressively focused on negative commercials would help the public hold candidates responsible for ads that crossed the threshold of responsibility."

The 1992 campaign also saw candidates appearing on venues, from "Larry King Live" to MTV, which until then had not been standard outlets for prospective presidents. Does this kind of exposure make campaign ads less important? Not in the least, according to West. "(Candidates) want to run their paid media campaign in such a way that they get free media coverage," he says. "The fact that there are alternative sources of information doesn't necessarily undermine ads, if ads set the agenda for how those appearances come off."

Early in the summer of 1992, for instance, focus groups showed that many people thought Bill Clinton came from a privileged background. "They saw him as someone who had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and went to Yale Law School," West says, "and assumed that he was a rich kid who had all the advantages. So the campaign then had to show that he had come from humble roots, worked his way up, overcome a lot of adversity in his life, and done well as a result."

To "humanize" Clinton, as West puts it, the campaign created ads that featured Clinton's tiny hometown of Hope, Arkansas, and they sent the candidate out to talk-show land. The morning after Clinton donned his shades and played the saxophone on "The Arsenio Hall Show," his photograph was on the front page of the *New York Times.*

One of the difficulties West faced in putting together *Air Wars* was tracking down old campaign ads. In the fifties and sixties ads were not routinely saved, and West spent a lot of time going through materials from an archive at the University of Oklahoma. For more recent elections, he found most campaign managers happy to send tapes. "I practically have a warehouse of ad tapes at this point," he says.

To get a clearer sense of what is actually going on in an ad, West often separates the audio from the visual. "When I have the ad on tape I watch the ad with the sound on and then with the sound off. It's a very effective way of seeing what message comes across, because people remember the visual portion of an ad a lot more than they remember the audio. That old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words is true in advertising."

West plans to write an updated version of *Air Wars* after the 1996 presidential campaign. He predicts ad watches will continue and there may be fewer out-and-out attack ads, as candidates become wary of voter backlash. "We're going to see a lot of negativity, but whether it's effective depends a lot on how it's done, how it gets reported, and what the circumstances are," he says.

He is unsure what the future will hold for the other big ad development of the 1992 presidential campaign – Ross Perot's half-hour infomercials. While they did draw large audiences (at times as many as 16 million viewers tuned in), West writes that "once the novelty wears off and news coverage of the broadcasts declines, viewership levels will most likely turn down."

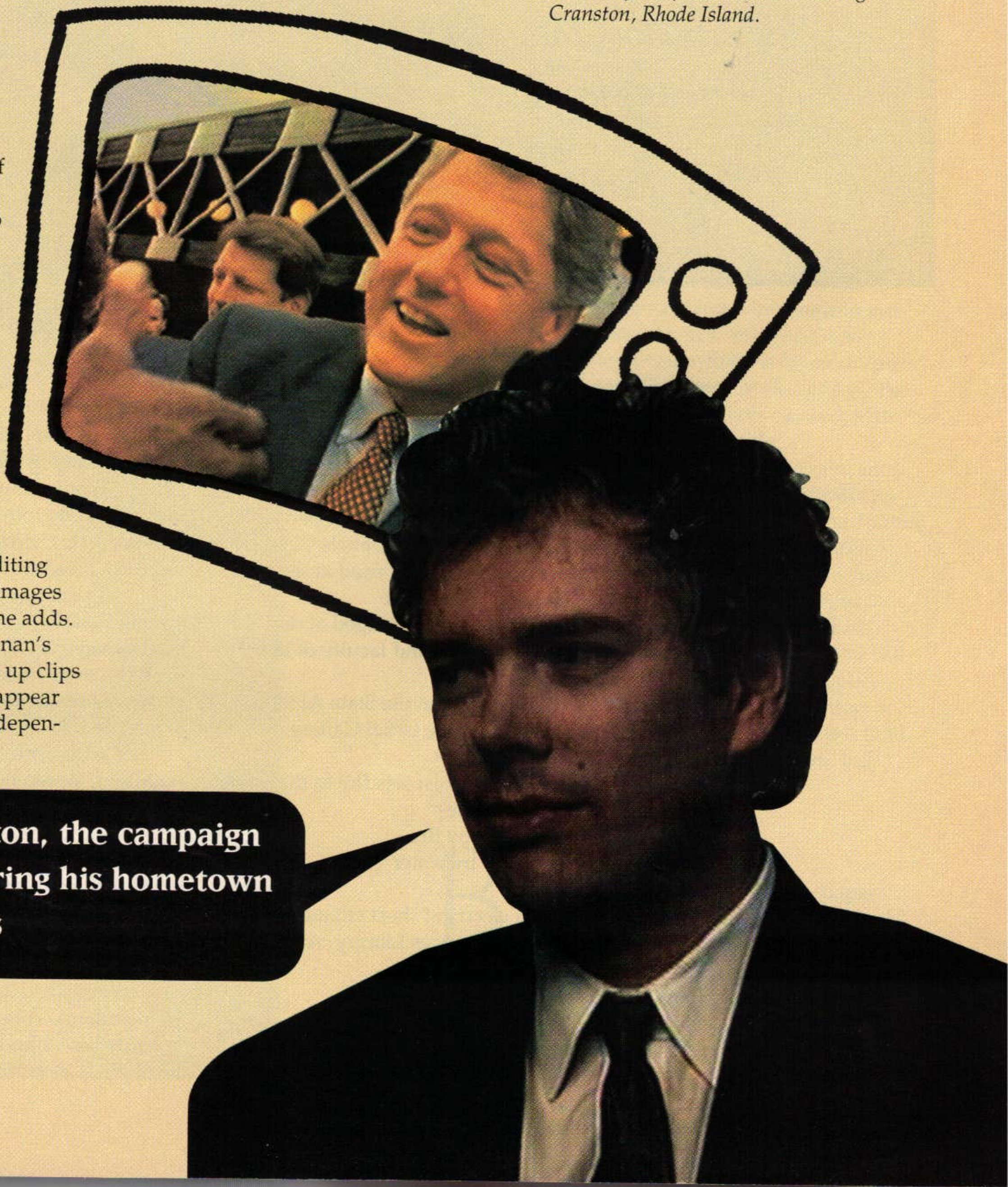
Other advertising developments concern West more. "In California, in the senate race of '92, we saw the innovation of the ten-second ad," he says, "which is probably the most disturbing development of all." In a ten-second ad, he points out, there's room for little more than name-calling.

Advances in digital video editing make it possible to manipulate images in ways viewers cannot detect, he adds. In 1992 candidate Patrick Buchanan's ad consultants actually speeded up clips of President Bush to make him appear jerky and out of control. One independent producer, West writes, admitted to doctoring an ad that showed Bill Clinton's hand raised high with Senator Ted Kennedy's. The ad was created from two separate photographs.

Political television spots are also beginning to appear beyond the boundaries of the electoral season. Is the perpetual campaign at hand? "There's no question," says West. "It used to be that ads were limited to candidate elections, but now they've become much more common in policy battles of all sorts." That list includes abortion, the battle over NAFTA, and Clinton's plan for health care reform.

If the discussion of serious issues continues its slide into the campaign area, West warns, "the big loser will be the political system as a whole, and how people feel about it." He concedes that some changes are positive, "in that the infomercial and other lengthy discussions offer the opportunity for more debate." But do the campaign commercials infiltrating policy battles across the national landscape actually help the debate? West says the answer is no.

Ed Hardy is a freelance writer living in Cranston, Rhode Island.



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