

Misplaced sympathy for media's 'victims' could backfire on public

By Michael A. Weinstein

Weinstein, a professor of political science at Purdue University, is the author of "Finite Perfection: Reflections on Virtue."

A new and disquieting twist to an old tactic has emerged in the current presidential campaign.

Ever since the press began to play an increasingly vital role in carrying on the debate and discussion that are the lifeblood of democracy, politicians have often found it advantageous to score points against the media, fashioning themselves as underdogs and accusing reporters and commentators of bias, distortion, and even malevolence.

Media-baiting has become a staple of the great game of politics, something that all of the players expect and, when it is kept to a normal level, that they take in stride. But now the limits of sportsmanship are being broken regularly, foreshadowing a dangerous change in the game itself.

Since World War II the media often have been called "the fourth branch of government," not only providing the public with information on political affairs, but also investigating and exposing abuses of public trust and, most importantly, defining and highlighting issues, and holding politicians and officials accountable for their positions on them.

The critical service that the electronic and print media perform in focusing discussion is neither accidental nor the result of a grab for power. In a society as complex, diverse and divided as ours there must be some mechanism for sorting out issues and placing them in an order of priority so that citizens will be able to exercise properly their responsibility for choosing among competing political alternatives. The press has become our great sorting mechanism, bringing some order to the chaos of demands by special interests and the varied challenges to public decision at home and abroad.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead taught that the first step we must take in grasping the world is to gain a sense of importance, an order of priority within the vast array of data that bombard us. The news media are instrumental in giving us that sense of importance in the world of public affairs.

But the service of agenda setting also carries power with it. The media do indeed constitute a fourth branch of government, playing an indispensable political role within large industrial democracies, whose citizens cannot communicate directly with each other.

And the media's political function, which is not partisan but brings divergent partisans to a common ground for debate, has made it exceedingly vulnerable to partisan attack.

When Dan Rather interviewed George Bush on CBS News he was performing the public role of the press in defining a sense of importance and holding a politician accountable for his deeds and positions. Whatever Rather's personal failings as an interviewer — perhaps he was too abrasive, summary and even arrogant — the deeper issue is whether he was justified in probing the vice president's conduct in the Iran-contra affair instead of feeding him questions on his major campaign themes.

We might imagine what our public debate would be like if we didn't have agents in the media who took the initiative and responsibility to set agendas independent of the preferences of partisan adversaries.

We would simply get a reproduction of the chaos of our complex society without any help in bringing it to focus and clarity. Politicians would get a free ride on the airwaves, but each one of us would be left to ourselves to discern some common ground, and we would never find it.

Rather was our representative when he interviewed Bush. Some of us may disagree with his sense of

importance, but we should realize the public significance of his role.

The danger to our democratic process does not lie in the media, but in the abuse by politicians of its agenda-setting function.

In the aftermath of the Bush-Rather confrontation it becomes clear that the vice president cynically welcomed the opportunity to be questioned on an irritating topic so that he could make political capital out of playing the victim of media bullying. It appears that his declared desire to speak about his campaign was merely rhetoric aimed at exploiting the interview.

Gary Hart has mounted a presidential campaign on the same basis of media-bashing, contriving an artificial underdog image. We can ex-

pect politicians to take advantage of every opportunity to gain public attention and sympathy, but we should recognize that in the process they are impairing a vital function of democracy.

The press in America has great power, but it is mainly the power to serve us by forming a public climate of opinion. If we respond with misplaced sympathy to the efforts of politicians and officials to cast themselves as victims of a malevolent media, the press eventually will take heed and will begin to exercise less initiative and responsibility.

We must ask ourselves if we are prepared to forfeit our public means to achieve a sense of importance. □