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Instead of TV attack ads, how about a 'print debate'?

TO MOVE away from politics as usual and to introduce a new political forum that will encourage thoughtful deliberation, I propose that California's gubernatorial and senatorial candidates initiate new campaign strategy: a "print debate."

Each candidate would pay to distribute a magazine-size insert of four to eight pages in selected newspapers and magazines — and challenge opponents to respond in kind. This "challenge document" could contain arguments along with photographs maps and/or graphs.

A candidate's first step to advance the print debate could be to call for a nonpartisan organization, such as the League of Women Voters, to create equitable terms. Once recognized standards are established, any of the candidates could initiate the debate.

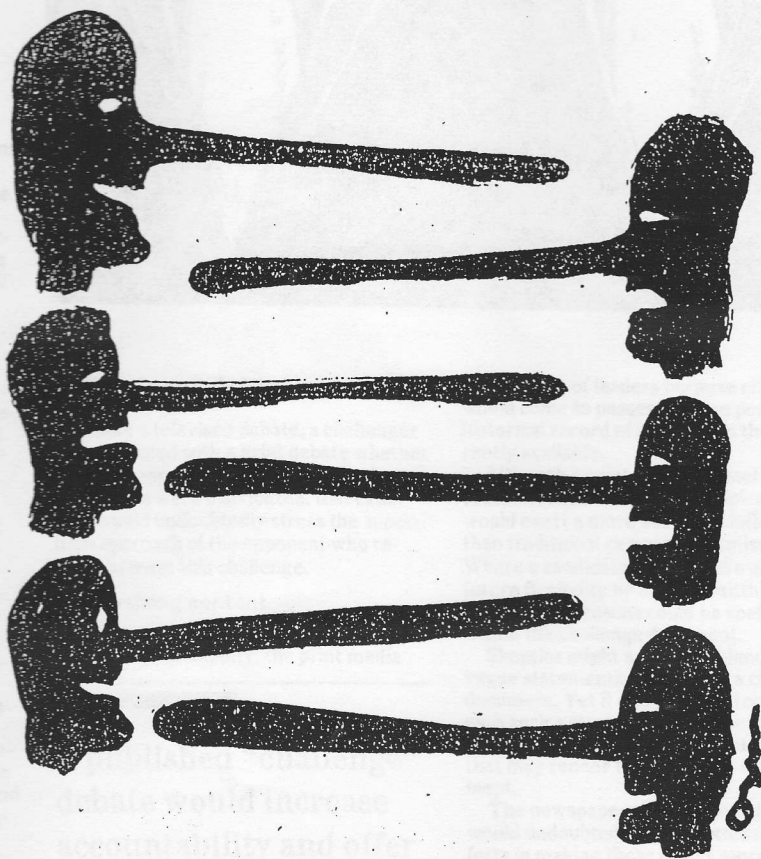
One of that challenger's motives would be to influence the undecided middle of the body politic. The opponent's motive to respond in kind would be to head off a shift of momentum in the polls.

Were candidates to agree to a print debate, at least four documents would be needed: the initial presentation, the response, the rebuttal and the response to the rebuttal. The interval between documents could be one week.

Just as journalists report on campaign developments today, the print debate would stimulate a larger media process — evening news, radio talk shows and general coverage in daily papers — that would heighten the public's expectations for the arrival of the challenge documents.

Whereas the electronic media tend to emphasize personality, the print media tend to emphasize content. While televised debates encourage brief exchanges, the print debate is better suited for exploring complex issues and presenting comprehensive arguments.

The typical campaign consists of a vast array of different messages that seem to bombard the citizen across many different media. The print debate



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would bring together the main issues of a campaign into a central group of documents that would encourage thoughtful deliberation.

The print debate would increase accountability because citizens would possess a permanent historical record. Although a print debate would not guarantee adherence to stated principles, it would exert a more sustained influence than traditional campaign promises.

Where a candidate foresees the need for flexibility by not committing to an issue, those reasons could be spelled out within the challenge document.

Neither opinion page face-offs nor voter pamphlets allow for the extensive and substantive rebuttals that are in-

herent in the print debate process.

Nor would these common messages ever be perceived as a central, historical record of a campaign; the challenge document may.

PREVIOUS attempts by newspapers and magazines to air opposing views will be perceived by the public as fundamentally different from this new medium of information.

Some will claim that the TV attack ad has become today's dominant electoral strategy because it works, which is to say: instilling fear has been effective.

As the public tires of this approach, some candidates will want to conduct a campaign of substance. This will con-

trast with the candidate who continues to rely on traditional campaign tactics that seldom get beyond the superficial.

In a gubernatorial or senatorial campaign, an economically feasible plan could call for three print media to distribute challenge documents throughout California — one predominantly in the south, one predominantly in the north and one statewide, including outlying regions.

These media would undoubtedly invest extensive efforts in making those issues more widely available than normal. The overall effect of adding this relatively inexpensive channel of com-

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munication to the larger repertoire of campaign strategies would be to level the economic playing field among candidates.

One cannot expect campaign media strategists to favor a print debate because this process may evolve in ways that would diminish their influence and income. Yet for Californians who have grown accustomed to campaigns that produce far more heat than light, the print debate will constitute a welcome departure from politics as usual.

More than 200 years ago, Americans engaged in an extended print debate that was a powerful influence on the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Like the "Federalist Papers" and "Anti-Federalist Papers," the modern print debate will raise the level of political discourse and help foster meaningful public dialogue.

If the print debate is an idea whose time has come, California candidates who adopt it may set into motion a process that would lead to a national print debate among presidential candidates in 1996.