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Slipping in political mud

THE good news is that the 2006 campaign has only a few more days to run. The bad news is that there's still plenty of time for the plague of savagely negative political ads that are making this election season the dirtiest in memory.

Both Democrats and Republicans are guilty, but it's no secret that most of this barrage of venom is coming from the GOP side, which, if polls are to be believed, is on the brink of an electoral thrashing on Tuesday.

With the Coingate trial making headlines daily in Ohio, the war in Iraq sliding toward disaster, and Washington beset by scandals involving lobbying corruption and sexually charged e-mail messages to congressional pages, the political atmosphere is particularly poisonous.

Because daily events are negative and no one has much of anything positive to talk about, the vortex of viciousness we're currently witnessing is the natural result, according to experts.

"When the news is bad, the ads tend to be negative," Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford University professor who specializes in political advertising, told the Washington Post. "And the more negative the ad, the more likely it is to get free media coverage. So there's a big incentive to go to extremes."

And, boy, do they go to extremes.

Here in Ohio, consider the nasty and outlandish attacks by Ken Blackwell on his opponent for governor, Ted Strickland.

Allegations about the Democratic candidate's personal life, a former campaign aide, and his residence in the state all have been aired before and found wanting. We will not repeat them in detail here, which is, after all, what a mudslinger wants.

Likewise, Sen. Mike DeWine has been running unrelenting TV ads against his Democratic challenger, Sherrod Brown, with the shocking - shocking, we tell you! - claim that Mr. Brown failed to pay \$1,700 in state unemployment taxes for his campaign committee 14 years ago.

As near as we can tell, this was an honest oversight on Mr. Brown's part that, according to state officials, was cleared up within four months back in 1994. The only purpose in bringing it up now is to throw slime on the Avon congressman, who's leading Mr. DeWine in the polls.

One of the worst examples of distortion is a TV spot Republican Betty Montgomery has thrown up against Democratic challenger Marc Dann in their race for attorney general, claiming that the Youngstown lawyer "defends" child molesters.

Actually, that's true. Mr. Dann once represented a molester in court. It's what lawyers do because, under our legal system, even the most despicable criminal defendants have a right to a defense. Ms. Montgomery knows that, of course, but truth is the first casualty in a political war.

Unfortunately, the barrage of negative advertising hurts more than just political candidates. Bit by bit, it grinds away whatever respect remains for our system of democratic government, which may be, in the final analysis, the biggest loser of all.