

In a war of ads, voters lose



By **CHRISTINA NUCKOLS**, The Virginian-Pilot
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RICHMOND - If your favorite television sitcom seems less funny lately, it might be the commercials.

The punch lines of the political advertisements for the races in Congress fall flat. To hear them tell it:

- Thelma Drake makes cute little girls sick.
- Phil Kellam wants to send Virginia families to the poor house.
- Jim Webb fabricates mean stories about women.
- George Allen used his Senate office to enrich himself with \$1 million in ill-gotten gains.

If outlandish, misleading attack ads make you want to stay home on Election Day, the joke's on you. Political experts say that most negative ads are designed to do just that: target certain groups and discourage them from voting.

Here's a look at some of the messages, misinformation, and hidden motivations being broadcast into your living room this fall:

Women and the military

In the U.S. Senate race, incumbent Republican George Allen has fired off two television commercials aimed at undermining support among women for Webb, the Democratic challenger.

Women are a key audience for political ads because they are more likely to vote than men, said Robert Denton Jr., a Virginia Tech communications professor and expert on political ads. The ads focus on women in the military at a time when public confidence over the war in Iraq has declined, putting Allen on the defensive for his longstanding support of the conflict.

In one ad, Naval Academy graduate Janice Buxbaum accuses Webb of misquoting her in a draft of a 1979 magazine article, "Women Can't Fight," in which he opposed allowing women in combat roles.

Buxbaum is not mentioned in the published article, and she told reporters she could not recall the specific quote attributed to her in the draft.

Ethics and character

Webb has questioned Allen's character and honesty.

A Webb television spot accuses Allen of trying to "steer government contracts to a company that paid him stock options. Allen claimed the options were worthless when really they were worth \$1.1 million. Now we find out that Allen hid his stock options for years."

The ad is based on an Associated Press story, but it mixes elements from two separate cases.

In one case, Allen sent a five-sentence form letter to Army officials in December 2001 asking them to respond to a letter from Xybernaut, a company in which he owned stock.



A television spot paid for by a group of former Democratic members of Congress, several actors accuse Drake of voting against federal funding for stem cell research.



Webb has questioned Allen's character in the wake of a Republican scandal on Capitol Hill and the incumbent's own well-publicized gaffes.

Allen staffers have said the senator never exercised stock options he held in the company. The value of his options reached \$1.1 million in March 2000, when Allen was not in public office. According to a Bloomberg financial report, the options were valued at \$71,500 in May 2001. The options later became worthless, and Xybernaut filed for bankruptcy in 2005.

In another instance, Allen was criticized for not reporting stock options he owns for Commonwealth Biotechnologies Inc. He reported the options in 2001 but said he left the stock off later annual reports because it was worthless.

Liberal tax-and-spenders

Republican-funded ads in the 2nd District accuse Democrat Phil Kellam of supporting a "gas tax hike on Virginia families."

Kellam was one of 18 people appointed to Gov. Mark Warner's Commission on Transportation in Urbanized Areas. The group concluded in its December 2005 report that the state needs more money for roads and identified higher gas taxes and interstate tolls as ideas that "merit exploration."



Republican-funded ads in the 2nd District accuse Democrat Phil Kellam of trying to raise the gas tax to "hurt Virginia Beach families."

The group also recommended transit improvements, energy efficiencies and land-use reforms.

Other ads try to tie Kellam to well-known Democrats in Congress, including Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California, by noting that national Democratic groups have paid for ads running in the campaign.

Scorched earth advocacy

Among the most sensational ads so far criticize U.S. Rep. Thelma Drake's voting record on stem cell research.

In a television spot paid for by Majority Action, a group of former Democratic members of Congress, several actors announce that they will face serious medical conditions. They say their treatment could benefit from stem cell research, and they accuse Drake of voting against funding that research.

A little girl who says she will be diabetic asks, "How come she thinks she gets to decide who lives and who dies?"

Drake has voted against federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. She has supported federal spending for research using umbilical cord stem cells.

Senior campaign officials defend the negative tone of their own ads.

"Elections are about choice," said Dick Wadhams, Allen's campaign manager. "It is entirely appropriate to draw comparisons."

Webb spokeswoman Kristian Denny Todd said her candidate has the right to defend himself against attacks.

"We weren't the first ones to go negative," she said, when asked about new

accusations leveled against Allen.

Denton, of Virginia Tech, said research shows that most of the political ads aired in the U.S. since 1992 have been negative. There's no sign that the trend will reverse itself because the negative attacks work, he said.

Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford political scientist, said both political parties have become adept at merging voter registration lists with other demographic information, including education levels, magazine subscriptions and shopping habits. They use that information to target audiences with TV and radio ads, phone calls and mailings.

"The fundamental objective of any ad is to drive up the targeted candidate's negatives, so by definition it's intended to suppress turnout of a certain group," Iyengar said. "Very few candidates can attract voters from the other side to vote for them. The next-best thing is to try to get potential voters for the other side to stay home."

That strategy worked on Sharon Ritchie of Virginia Beach.

Ritchie said she's tired of being pelted by phone calls and television ads at home every day as she cares for her grand daughter.

"It's at night. It's in the morning. It's just all day," she said. "I just walk away. I stopped voting because they just backstab each other and you don't know who to believe."

Staff reporter Tony Germanotta contributed to this report.

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