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## TODAY'S PAPER COMMENT

### Attack ads attacked

By HUGH WINSOR

Saturday, June 19, 2004 - Page A7

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Despite the sustained flak they are taking from within the Liberal Party, the heavy-handed men who are running Liberal Leader Paul Martin's campaign say their negative television advertising campaign against Conservative Leader Stephen Harper is working and is contributing to a Liberal turnaround, especially in Ontario.

There is no doubt the ad, which shows soldiers jumping out of an armoured personnel carrier in a war zone, a revolver pointed at the camera, an aircraft carrier, a young pregnant woman cowering in a doctor's office and a tattered Canadian flag, are controversial. There is also no doubt many of the people upset about them are Liberals, especially Liberal women who say anything that links revolvers and women amounts to fear-mongering.

Several Liberal candidates have gone public with their unhappiness. They remember how the Conservative ads focusing on Jean Chrétien's partial facial paralysis backfired and were quickly pulled off the air. Moreover, attack advertising is not in keeping with traditional Canadian civility.

The tension turns on the difference between "earned media," that is, public press reports that have reflected Liberal rank-and-file unhappiness, and "paid media," advertising that the purchaser, in this case, the campaign strategists, control.

Unapologetic Liberal strategist John Webster, who was responsible for the Liberals' famous disappearing border ad in the 1988 free-trade election, claims the ad portraying Conservatives as warmongers and anti-abortionists, which began running 10 days ago, has halted the Conservative momentum by driving up negative perceptions about Mr. Harper among the electorate.

Wherever this ad has been run heavily, according to Steve MacKinnon, the Liberal Party's deputy national director, "we have seen a marked progression in Harper's negatives." He and his colleagues also think it has helped shift the focus of the campaign, at least outside of Quebec, away from the sponsorship scandal and corruption, toward civil rights, Charter challenges and social conservatism and, possibly, health care.

A glance at the headlines coming out of the English-language television debate tends to confirm that assessment.

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Have you decided who you will vote for on June 28?



Yes



No

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Morning Smile

Q: What do you call a parking-lot dent inflicted on your car by one of those massive military-like SUVs? A: A hummer dinger. Bruce Dewar, Coldbrook, N.S.

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The strategists believe it is not important who "won" the debates on the classical points-scoring attack and counterattack basis that preoccupies the media. Rather, the more important factor is what issues the viewers take away with them. The Liberal strategists believe the ad campaign and the debates have prodded many voters to consider issues they had not focused on before.

Elated by the perceived success of the warmongers, anti-abortion ad, the Liberals are re-enforcing it with a new ad focusing on Mr. Harper's fiscal policies, trying to link the Conservative Leader to negative memories of prime minister Brian Mulroney and Ontario premier Mike Harris.

The Liberals say their own numbers put them back in the lead nationally driven by an eight-percentage-point swing in their favour in Ontario since the ads began running. Recent polling numbers contain some confirmation for the Liberal claims about halting their decline. SES Research's tracking poll done for the CPAC network shows that Conservative support peaked about June 9, at about the same time the warmongers ad began running. The Liberals' sharp decline in the first 10 days of the campaign has also evened out.

The more dramatic Liberal claims about turnaround have not been borne out by public polls, including the SES tracking, which still show Conservatives in the lead. But SES Research president Nick Nanos says he has picked up some Liberal gains in recent days, especially after the introduction of the anti-Harper fiscal ad, the first time he has found such a correlation.

The electorate is obviously in flux, but if it turns out that negative television advertising is as effective as the Martin hit-men claim, it is a troublesome reflection on the quality of politics in 2004.

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