

TV, money, and 'Crossfire' politics



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writes from Washington

HERE are no unscripted moments in American politics anymore, certainly not days before the presidential election. That's why the talk of Washington last week was a few minutes of spontaneous unrehearsed drama among TV personalities, not politicians. Comedy Central's Jon Stewart, host of the wicked political satire "The Daily Show," had gone on CNN's "Crossfire" as a guest and complained about the show. "It's hurting America," Stewart said, explaining that "Crossfire" and programmes like it were not discussion shows but theatre. His hosts seemed

stunned "Come on. Be funny," Tucker Carlson said plaintively. Perhaps it's unfair to single out "Crossfire" for scorn, but on his broader point, Stewart is exactly right. The structure of political life in Washington is increasingly made for theater, partisan fund-raising, polling and consulting but not for governing. And after a close election the problem is only going to get worse.

Paul Begala, "Crossfire's" other host, explained his show this way:

"Everything is reduced to left vs. right, black vs. white." Exactly, but "Crossfire" is now a metaphor for

than television. Any policy proposed from the left is sure to meet an instant avalanche of criticism from right-wing think tanks, talk shows, political groups, and, of course, politicians. This is less true of the left, but just wait. Liberal donors are forming groups of their own, hoping to mirror the right's success at this game. All of which means that honest debate, bipartisanship, and, hence, governance become close to impossible.

Some political scientists long wished that America's political parties looked more like European

republic.

I know that these complaints all sound very high-minded and squishy. And I know there's long been lots of nasty partisanship in America, especially in Madison's own era. But there has also been lots of bipartisanship, especially over the past century. Reacting to the political bitterness of the late 19th century the last time there were two close elections in succession many American leaders tried to create forces for good, problem-solving government. Robert Brookings established the Brookings Institution in Washington (in 1916) because he wanted an institute "free

... to collect, interpret, and lay before the country in a coherent form, the fundamental economic facts. The Council on Foreign Relations, founded five years later, also consciously reached across party lines. The first editor of its magazine, Foreign Affairs, told his deputy that if one of them became publicly identified as a Democrat, the other should immediately start campaigning for the Republicans. Contrast that with the much more recently founded think tank, the conservative Heritage Foundation, whose former senior vice president Burton Pines is refreshingly frank and has admitted:

"Our role is to provide conservative policymakers with arguments to bolster our side." The trouble is that progress on any major problemthe deficit, Social Security, health carewill require compromise from both sides. The country is evenly divided. In foreign policy, crafting a solution in Iraq, or a policy for Iran and North Korea, or a long-term strategy toward Asia will all need significant support from both sides. But that's highly unlikely. Other than the occasional

maverick statesmen like John McCain, those who advocate such compromises will find themselves marginalised by the party's leadership, losing funds from special-interest groups and constantly attacked by their "side" on "Crossfire." Better to stand firm, don't give in and go back and tell your team that you refused to bow to the enemy. It's terrible for governing, but it's great for fund-raising.

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politics in Washington. There are two teams, each with its own politicians, think tanks, special-interest groups, media outfits, and TV personalities. The requirement of this world is that you must always be reliably left or right: if you are an analyst "on the right" you must always support what the team does. If President Bush invades Iraq, you support it. If he increases the deficit, you support that. If he opposes stem-cell research, you support that, too. There's no ideological coherence or consistency to these positions. Republicans are now fervent nation-builders, but only two years ago scowfully opposed the whole concept. You must support your team. If you don't, it screws up the TV show.

The problem is much larger

onesideologically pure and tightly disciplined. Well, it's happened there are fewer and fewer moderates on either side and the results are polarisation and gridlock. Europe's parliamentary systems work well with partisan parties. There, the executive branch always controls the legislative branch, and so the party in power can pass its agenda easily. Tony Blair doesn't need any support from Tories. The American system, by contrast, is one of shared power, overlapping functions and checks and balances. To make progress, one needs broad coalitions between the two parties and politicians who will cross the aisle. That's why James Madison distrusted political parties themselves, lumping them together with all kinds of "factions," considering them a grave danger to the young American

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