

Forbes Mixes Optimism, Negative Ads

FORBES, From A1

Dole—Washington Values. Steve Forbes—Conservative Values.”

Unlike some candidates, Forbes has not used advertising to skewer his opponents in personal terms. The worst epithet he has hurled at Dole and Gramm is that they are part of that dreaded species, “Washington politicians.”

Pressed about his commercials by Bob Schieffer on CBS’s “Face the Nation” Sunday, Forbes said: “You call them negative. Every ad that I’ve run has been about specific issues—spending issues and tax issues. In a democracy it is legitimate to discuss those issues.”

The Forbes media blitz is unprecedented because his self-financed effort is not bound by federal spending limits, allowing him to saturate the airwaves at several times the level of his rivals, particularly in such early-voting states as Iowa, New Hampshire and Arizona. He has even bought national spots on CNN, CNBC, A&E and Lifetime, an almost unheard-of move at this stage of the race.

Don Sipple, a Dole media adviser, says his research indicates Forbes has purchased 13,000 gross ratings points on New Hampshire and Boston stations over four months, meaning the average New Hampshire viewer would have seen a Forbes ad 130 times. By contrast, a significant national buy for a new car or diet cola would be 400 or 500 gross ratings points a week, and would probably fade after two or three weeks.

Donny Deutsch, a New York advertising executive whose clients have included Ikea and Filene’s Basement, said Forbes’s level of spending was “phenomenal. He’s owning the airwaves. The similarity, whether you’re selling potato chips or a candidate, is that you’re getting a brand name out. The difference is that you’re in daily communication warfare. When Nike designs an ad campaign, they just do ‘Do It.’ In a campaign, you’ve got the message changing daily.”

Forbes launched two new spots yesterday, one of them an attack on Gramm: “Last fall, Phil Gramm voted against Senate consideration of a flat



Microphones surround Forbes after campaign appearance in Derry, N.H. ASSOCIATED PRESS

tax. Phil Gramm also voted with Bob Dole nine times to raise our taxes. . . . Phil Gramm even voted for special tax loopholes for his oil industry campaign contributors.” (Gramm spokesman Jim McAvoy accused Forbes of distorting “legislative minutiae.”

The Forbes offensive began in late September with unadorned positive spots, featuring little more than type on the screen and the candidate speaking to the camera. Again and again, viewers heard, “Put in a low flat tax. It’s simple, it’s honest, and that’s a big change for Washington.” Castellanos calls it “see-Spot-run advertising, not a lot of bells and whistles.”

But soon Forbes was targeting Dole, Gramm and even Alexander, who lags far behind in the polls. The Forbes camp says that Wrenn, who does not speak to reporters, is just one staffer helping to shape the ads, along with the candidate, campaign manager William Dal Col, pollster John McLaughlin, press secretary Gretchen Morgenson and others. But Ellis told the Raleigh Triangle Business Journal last fall that “as far as the nuts and bolts of the campaign, Carter is doing it all.”

The harder-edged ads have increasingly been criticized as misleading. One spot said that “Bob Dole voted to increase taxpayer-funded pensions,” although Forbes could point only to Dole’s votes to boost lawmakers’ pay, which in turn raises their pensions. Another said that “Gramm help[ed] engineer a staggering \$100 billion tax increase,” although Gramm abandoned his initial support and voted against the 1990 measure. Still another blamed Dole for canceling a vote on congress-

sional term limits, although the majority leader acted at the request of term-limits advocates.

“These are not ad hominem attacks,” said Morgenson, Forbes’s spokeswoman. “It’s not necessarily negative to say you raised taxes 16 times in the last 14 years, Senator Dole.”

The ads do not strike some voters as negative. “They show opposition to the other candidate, but they’re not as harsh,” said Peter Gumaskas, a Derry, N.H., businessman. “They’re not rude.”

But Sipple said the ads render Forbes “a two-dimensional candidate—for a flat tax, and an outsider. In the end he’ll regret that he didn’t fill in more of his side of the ledger with positives.”

The Forbes ads tend to make news more often than the candidate, whose message varies little on the stump. If asked about abortion, he insists he wants the practice to “vanish,” even though he does not support a constitutional amendment to ban abortions. If asked whether his proposal to end home mortgage deductions would hurt the housing market, he scoffs at “critics” and “fear-mongers.” If asked why he doesn’t release his tax returns, he calls the issue a “diversion.”

The danger for Forbes is that voters may come to view his attack ads as just more politics as usual. Political analysts were particularly surprised when Forbes spent money assailing Alexander.

At the very least, the Forbes fusillade has altered the campaign’s direction by forcing Dole and Gramm to return fire, with Dole’s ads denouncing Forbes as untested and unqualified. “We don’t have much choice,” Sipple said.