When Political Advertising Abandons the Truth

by Phil Rasmussen

As we are closing in on the mid-term elections, the intensity and volume of political ads are inundating the American public. It is enough that we see these ads on television, newspapers and social media platforms as we search the Internet. But to receive them in our email, messages, and in our mailbox or even left at our front doors, is a step too far.

In 1914, Congress enacted the “Federal Trade Commission Act,” marking the beginning of federal regulation of advertising practices. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) enforces truth-in-advertising laws designed to protect consumers from deceptive advertising. Since its establishment, the FTC has enacted various advertising protection laws addressing the use of new and emerging technologies used for advertising. Note that date! Regulation of advertising started more than 100 years ago.

The problem is that the FTC has taken little to no action with regard to political advertising and they have classified such advertising as “free speech” under the First Amendment. Yet, with regard to the act, the FTC is charged with protecting consumers from misleading advertisements and deceptive practices that include false claims or misleading information.

There is, however, another problem. Politicians, political candidates, political action committees, and others have taken the FTC approach to mean that they can abrogate the truth. We need to understand that these groups are not just standing on a soapbox. Instead, they are using media to advertise their views and agendas.

Political flyers generally fall into one of two categories. Those that praise candidates and those that disparage a candidate. I have no problems with the flyers that praise a candidate and presents his/her agenda. However, those flyers that disparage or vilify a candidate usually contain lies, falsehoods partial truths, and misdirection.

For example, North Carolina Families First distributed flyers criticizing Sarah Stevens for defending a person described as a child predator. The fact that an attorney represented a criminal defendant, by itself, does not establish that the attorney condones the defendant's conduct. Defense attorneys are obligated to represent their clients to the best of their ability. Since the flyer highlights the representation without explaining its relevant context, voters should ask whether the presentation gives a fair account of the attorney's role—or is designed primarily to create an inflammatory or negative emotional reaction.

A NC Families First press release states that it "launched a multimillion-dollar statewide media campaign..."against Stevens. This is problematic! According to its disclosure of campaign funds to the NC State Board of Elections, the organization has received donations of $690,000 and expenditures of $282,021.81. So, the question is, "how can the organization launch a multimillion-dollar campaign with only $407,978.19 in its coffers?"

Before believing any of these campaign flyers, be sure to check the facts and question them as well. Remember, any statement on these flyers can be true, but fail to present the "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

It is sad that in a nation founded on Judeo-Christian beliefs that so many people, calling themselves Christians, create or perpetuate false accusations.

Biblical scripture commands us not to make false accusations (Exodus 20:26). It also calls us to speak truthfully and to reflect on our words. False accusations often damage relationships and community trust: and eventually, the consequences will catch up with the accuser.

And all for what? Political power? Jealousy? Hatred? Covetousness? Greed? Envy?

So much is destroyed, so much trust is lost, and nothing good arises from the ashes of falsehood.