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THE BATTALION

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## Reality for president

### Proposed political reality show mirrors real-life Hollywood politics, producer says

By Glenn Garvin  
KRT CAMPUS

If California's recent gubernatorial recall election struck you as alarmingly like an episode of "American Idol," brace yourself: A Hollywood producer is pitching a show called "American Candidate" on which 100 contestants vie to become a "people's candidate" for president next year.

Several broadcast executives say they expect "American Candidate" to land somewhere on television next year. The show's producer, R.J. Cutler, says it's inevitable: "Politics and television live at the same intersection. There's no news in that."

The idea of choosing an American president on a game show might seem like a scene trimmed from the bitter TV satire "Network." But as the 2004 presidential campaign approaches, it's getting harder to tell television fantasy from political fact.

TV sets click on all over Washington, D.C., Sunday nights as the starstruck city tunes in to watch itself on HBO's "K Street," an insider drama about sleazy lobbyists in which saber-toothed spin-masters James Carville and Mary Matalin play themselves. "Holy (bleep), are people watching the thing!" exclaims CNN "Crossfire" combatant Tucker Carlson, a confirmed addict.

NBC's White House policy-opera "The West Wing," widely believed to be headed for a Nielsen-ratings recall last season, just won its fourth straight best-drama Emmy, and its ratings are stronger than ever.

A malaprop-spouting President Bush has been a character on episodes of two different sitcoms, NBC's "Whoopi" and ABC's "The George Lopez Show," this fall, touching off heated, and hilarious, arguments among the characters on both shows. "Anytime you do that sort of humor, it's a bit risky," concedes "Whoopi" producer Larry Wilmore. "But why not be a little daring? Who knows, you might get slapped on the nose, or people might love it."

Nowhere was the flicker between image and reality more confusing than the California recall election, fought out on late-night talk shows right to the bitter end, when the defeated Gray Davis used David Letterman's show to offer a Top 10 list of sarcastic suggestions to victor Arnold Schwarzenegger. ("No. 8: 'Listen to your constituents -- except Michael Jackson.'")

The recall election didn't just SEEM like a TV show: it WAS a TV show: The Game Show Network's "Who Wants to Be Governor of California?" in which five dozen of the real candidates competed for viewer votes to win a \$21,000 campaign contribution. Winner: Porn actress Mary Carey, who promised to tax breast implants.

The idea that his program, however whimsical, might be helping to turn U.S. elections into "American Idol" doesn't concern Game Show Network president Rich Cronin: "Watch these debates between the Democratic presidential candidates. Afterward, the pundits talk about who won, who lost, who said something stupid, who showed talent. It's really very much like 'American Idol.'"

Dismissive, too, is Cutler, the veteran documentary-maker behind "American Candidate." Concerns about the malign influence of television on politics, he says, should be focused in a different direction.

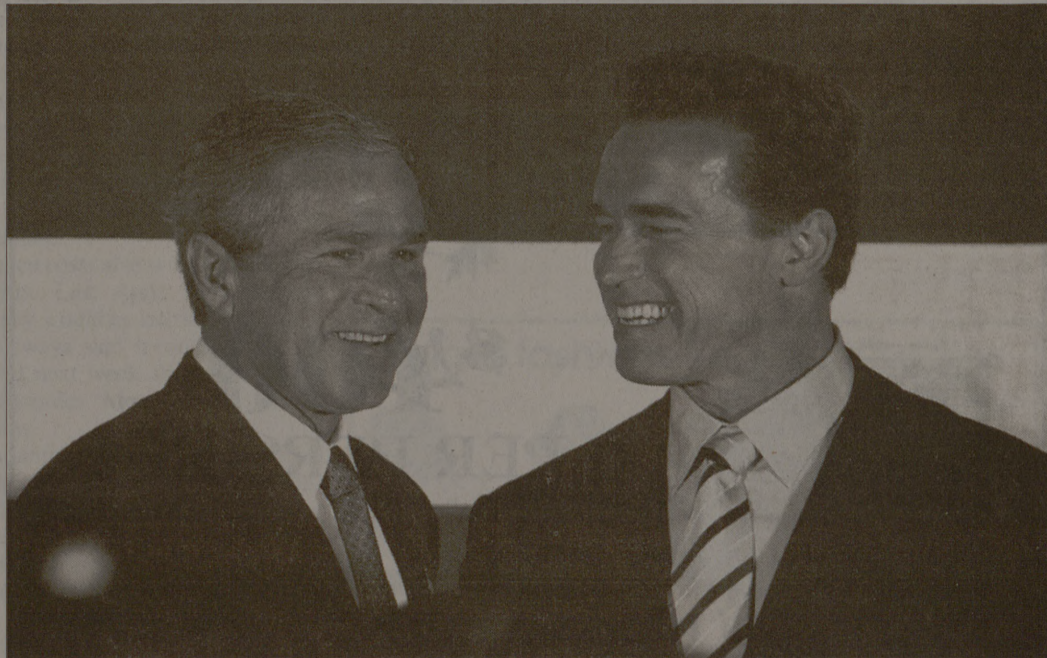
"You have these very powerful cable news networks. If one or more of those news channels have a political agenda, is that a good thing? Is that a dangerous thing?" he argues. "I worry far less about the subject of politics as entertainment."

Entertainment TV's interest in politics is nothing new — the networks have been staging dramas and sitcoms in Washington and other political settings for more than four decades. The results have ranged from the ludicrous (NBC's 1978 "Grandpa Goes To Washington") to the downright bizarre (UPN's 1998 "The Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer," in which a black butler counseled a sex-crazed Abraham Lincoln).

"There's this two-way thing between Hollywood and Washington, because both of them know that what they do is a show," says Diana McLellan, a veteran Washington gossip columnist and author of "The Girls," a history of lesbian society in Hollywood. "Each of them has this little knot of respect for the other. It is truly pathetic."

Until "The West Wing," the mutual infatuation had never produced successful offspring: TV shows set in Washington have been shunned by both viewers and critics. Most have followed the same pattern, derived from the 1939 James Stewart film "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington": A truthful common man goes to Washington and fights the deceitful special interests.

"I think there has been an attitude on



California Gov.-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger introduces President George W. Bush to a crowd of Republican supporters in San Bernadino, Calif. last week.

Hollywood's part, in dealing with Washington and politics, that people wanted to see their politicians — or their government — in a certain reverential way," says Stuart Stevens, a Republican political consultant and co-producer of "K Street."

Its "cinema verite" style is bolstered by the use of real-life Washington figures, from senators like Orrin Hatch and Barbara Boxer to think-tank mavens like Kenneth Adelman, playing themselves, using mostly unscripted dialogue. The resulting collision of styles and cultures has produced some real Kodak moments.

In a scene where political consultant Paul Begala was supposed to be helping Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean prepare for a debate, Begala warned him not to make personal attacks on one of the other candidates, "or he'll (bleep) you like a tied dog." Gasped a shocked Dean: "Paul, I don't think you can say that on HBO."

Slow-moving and sometimes indecipherable in

its inside-baseball approach to politics, "K Street" is the lowest-rated drama in years on HBO's powerhouse Sunday-night lineup.

But the Washington Post runs a regular George Clooney sighting feature reporting the whereabouts of "K Street's" executive producer, and the high-octane political newsletter The Hotline has Your "K Street" Summary listing the latest power players to land cameos appearances on the show. Even journalists like Washington Post media writer Howard Kurtz and Time columnist Joe Klein have gone panting after roles.

The show's conquest of Capitol Hill appalls some. "We in Washington are very self-important people, and the people you see in 'K Street' are particularly self-important," jeers Kim Hume, the Washington bureau chief of Fox News. "It's a little cabal of Washington insiders who live for this stuff. From my perspective, it's a ridiculous way to spend your time."

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