

# *Politics with an Attitude*



Every Sunday morning TV's "Flashpoint" thrusts Mike Turpen, left, and Burns Hargis into thousands of Oklahoma homes with head-to-head political commentary and snappy repartee.

Burns Hargis and Mike Turpen's  
razor-sharp insight  
and sense of humor make them  
Oklahoma's most-watched pundits.

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

*continued*



To moderator Kevin Ogle, center, falls the task of separating the playful television combatants, Mike Turpen, left, and Burns Hargis, and keeping their freewheeling, wildly divergent political opinions and debate on track. First paired for election-night analysis a dozen years ago, Democratic attorney Turpen and Republican lawyer-turned-banker Hargis, both former gubernatorial candidates, have parlayed keen insight, witty retorts and a genuine respect for each other into a weekly show, "Flashpoint," and a steady stream of on-the-road appearances throughout the state.

*Rock-solid Republican Burns Hargis, dedicated Democrat Mike Turpen and moderate moderator Kevin Ogle are discussing intensely three Oklahoma issues to be placed before today's "Flashpoint" guest: a tribal gaming agreement, a cigarette tax and tort reform. Around the darkly burnished wooden table, Hargis curls forward like The Thinker, chin on hand; Turpen leans in toward him, looking judicial with fingertips pressed together and lips pursed; and Ogle, body upright in perfect professional posture sits between them poised to perform.*

*Suddenly, three cameramen, alerted to the arrival of the guest, move to their positions. The Thinker, the Judge and the Pro rise quickly as a state trooper, two office staff members and Governor Brad Henry stride into the chilly chamber.*

*The verbal jousting begins as the governor clips on his microphone. These four knights of political commentary settle themselves around the appropriately Arthurian round table where no one holds a dominant position and a code of civilized debate governs each verbal tournament. Turpen turns to the governor as the cameramen prepare to roll.*

*"Sooner Magazine is doing a story about Burns and me. Tell the journalist what a great show you think 'Flashpoint' is," he says with characteristic bravado.*

*Turpen clearly is joking, but Henry does not miss a beat in responding seriously.*

*"It's certainly the best political show in Oklahoma at bringing together diverse points of view and raising the level of political discourse in the state," the governor says.*

*Henry clearly is serious, but Hargis does not miss a beat in responding humorously.*

*"He usually says to us, 'I love your show, "Flashpoint," and I watch it every Saturday morning,'" he says. Then, after a perfectly timed pause: "We air Sundays."*

*"Ready. In five, four, three, two, one," a cameraman counts down amid the laughter, and another episode of "Flashpoint" is headed to tape in its standard on-cue, on-time and on-target fashion.*

Hargis and Turpen's 30-minute political talk show on KFOR Channel 4 for 12 years has presented Oklahomans with a balanced mixture of the high-minded and the humorous. Its hosts, both former gubernatorial candidates, have asked questions of and argued genially with the likes of Pat Robertson, Tipper Gore, John Kerry, Joe Lieberman, Barry Switzer, James Carville, Ken Starr and then-Texas Governor George W. Bush. Almost every Oklahoma political figure and civic leader has dropped by. Former Governor Frank Keating estimates he appeared on the show 25 times.

*"Flashpoint" is a must-do for any politician in Oklahoma,"*

## **“Mike and Burns are excellent communicators and passionate about what they believe in. Our viewers love them and hate them, or is it love to hate them?”**

Keating says. “Despite their political differences, Burns and Mike are able to discuss the issues in an intelligent, sometimes humorous, always interesting way. I’m grateful neither was elected governor so we can enjoy them on television. They have a definite chemistry that makes the show work well.”

Everyone mentions the dueling duo’s chemistry. Some inexplicable reaction of personal elements makes of these two extremely different but equally charismatic hosts one of the oddest but most successful couples since Neil Simon gave life to the fictional Felix and Oscar.

These two characters are, of course, real Oklahomans with really deep roots in state politics. Hargis, a lawyer for more than 25 years before becoming vice chairman of Bank of Oklahoma in 1997, earned his law degree at the University of Oklahoma after a bachelor’s at Oklahoma State University, where he currently is a regent. He has served as a Republican Party ballot security officer and Republican member of the State Election Board. Turpen earned his law and undergraduate degrees from the University of Tulsa. Now a partner at Oklahoma City’s Riggs, Abney, Neal, Turpen, Orbison & Lewis, he is a former Oklahoma attorney general and chairman of the state Democratic party. Turpen made his unsuccessful run for governor in 1986, Hargis in 1990. Each sees clearly what he won when he lost.

The “Flashpoint” cast does their homework before arriving on the set to tape their interview with former Congressman and U.S. Senatorial candidate Tom Coburn. Beyond that preparation, there is no script, no rehearsal, no editing; one take, and they are done.

“When I ran for governor, I had all these people telling me, ‘Look, you can’t seem like a clown. You’ve got to be serious and substantive and wear a furrowed brow and all that stuff,’” Hargis says. “I now know that was terrible advice. First,

I wasn’t truly myself. Second, what I was wasn’t very appealing.”

The Turpen campaign tale concludes with a strikingly similar moral.

“When I ran for public office, everyone said, ‘You’re a funny guy, but we have to show voters you have a serious side,’” he says. “I told them, ‘All the people I took on as attorney general know I’m serious. Everyone knows I’m serious.’ But it’s tough to run for public office and let people see your human, humorous side while showing you are serious about what you stand for and what you’ve accomplished politically. It was a hard blend for me as well as for Burns.

“The show allows us to be who we really are. I’ve said this before, but I want to say it again. He’s like Descartes. *Cogito ergo*

Sanford Mauldin



sum: I think, therefore, I am. I'm like Rousseau: I feel, therefore, I am."

That clever sound bite, which both men excel at producing, signals the obvious: These men are polar opposites. The more complex truth, of course, is that Hargis is a feeling thinker, and Turpen is a thinking feeler. Producer Mary Ann Eckstein knew immediately the two were individually complicated and jointly charismatic as she watched them perform as political analysts during the station's coverage of the 1992 presidential election. She offered them a weekly shot; they took it.

"Mike and Burns are excellent communicators and passionate about what they believe in," she says. "Our viewers love them and hate them, or is it love to hate them? Whether our viewers chastise, coach or compliment, they are just as vocal as Turpen and Hargis. We love that."

What's not to love? Eckstein says that the NBC affiliate consistently wins the ratings game in the show's Sunday 9:30 to 10 a.m. time period. In 1999, a five-year contract extension secured "Flashpoint" until April 2004. No fools, KFOR man-

agement locked the seriously satirical pair up for another nickel when the first was spent. They are in until 2009. The show provides a showcase for the two who sought and lost a platform.

"You can be politically active without being a political candidate," Turpen says. "You can put a bumper sticker on your car and raise money and vote and even get on television and argue like heck, but you don't have to run for office. On the show, we get to help our causes, the causes we really believe in."

For those causes and, both admit freely, for the thrill of bringing down the house, the men spend hours each week preparing the show and several evenings each month driving the length and breadth of the state to perform a spin-off act at banquets, civic organization gatherings and political events.

"My granddad said politics is an incurable malady. It really does get into your blood," Hargis says. "All of the excitement

and the intrigue and the competitiveness are very intoxicating to us. You've got to feed this thing that craves politics. You can do that by running for office or running campaigns, but you can also do it this way."

The road show—which Turpen labels "infotainment," and Hargis says has "enough nonsense to be entertaining and enough common sense to be informative"—is not just the television

show on the road. It is a comedy act. Substantive discussion generally leads to what Hargis calls a "deep down surge of energy." Live audiences want to laugh at Hargis and Turpen poking fun at politicians and at themselves. They are happy to oblige.

The television show has its share of one-liners, but it also presents the hosts' impressive knowledge of state and national politics. Turpen says that to represent Fortune 500 companies from all over the country as he does, he has to know what is going on in the world. He reads five newspapers daily. All that vocation-required information feeds into his avocation. Hargis says that while some find pleasure in reading a novel or watching television, he is "just as jazzed by reading political stuff or watching political talk shows."

Their party connections provide inside scoop.

To put a show together, the two talk early in the week on current events and gathering issues. If a potential guest has a Turpen tie, the donkey man snags him or her. The elephant man pursues those with a righter leaning. They schedule a taping around their busy schedules, the needs of their headliner and the news cycle Ogle works under. They read no script. They require only one take. No one edits the tape. What viewers see and hear is what those on set did and said.

"Anytime someone asks, 'Do you rehearse that show?' I say that is the most flattering thing anyone has ever said to me," Hargis says.

Devin Scillian, "Flashpoint's" host in 1992 and now an anchor on Detroit's WDIV-TV, says the pair's performances both on tape and on stage evoke the natural style and spirit of Will Rogers.



Photo provided

When then-Texas governor George W. Bush, left, came to town, Democratic tormentor Mike Turpen ironically was out of town, leaving conservative partner Burns Hargis, right, and show moderator Kevin Ogle to handle the taping of "Flashpoint" at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.



Members of OU's Political Communication Center Advisory Board, Hargis and Turpen have donated 10 years of "Flashpoint" tapes, 1993-2002, to the Julian Kanter Political Commercial Archive, including these frames from interviews with, from top, NBC News political analyst Tim Russert, Democratic operative James Carville and former state secretary of commerce and editor of the *Black Dispatch*, Russell Perry.

"When I give speeches about television and politics, Turpenisms and Hargisisms pour forth from me with shocking ease," he says. "When scandal erupts, I'm mindful that Burns was always first to say, 'Follow the money.' When things get ugly in campaigns, I remember Mike saying, 'There are only three times when negative campaigning works: when you're behind, when you're ahead and when you're even.' When someone refuses to see the obvious, I hear Burns saying, 'If 10 people tell you you're drunk, you need to lie down.' And I can still hear Mike saying, 'To too many people, justice means *just us.*'"

Scillian now hosts a political talk show called "Flashpoint" on WDIV, but the news anchor found his Detroit duplicate could not match the Oklahoma original.

"You don't exactly find a Mike and Burns in the want ads," he says. "They remind me of the old Warner Brothers cartoon in which a sheepdog and a coyote walk together to work, clock in, beat the tar out of each other all day, break for lunch, fight some more and then walk home like pals talking about their day."

How the "Flashpoint" hosts duke it out verbally on significant political and social issues reminds Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson, who says he has appeared on the show at least six times, of a setting quite different from that of Scillian's cartoon.

"It's much like a U. S. Supreme Court argument, where the guest is the catalyst for the arguments of the justices," he says. "The show is lively, the topics timely, and the hosts ask good questions. They are both smart and possess great senses of humor. Many hosts are one or the other, but the secret of Mike and Burns' success is they are both."

Ogle, who became moderator on Scillian's departure, says that because the men are well connected within Oklahoma and national politics, are both experienced lawyers who know how to argue effectively and have become television savvy, they appeal to a large and diverse audience. "Most people watch political affairs shows to see what the other guy is saying," he says. "Republican viewers tune in to get mad at Mike and listen to Burns set him straight. For Democratic viewers, the opposite is true."

Turpen and Hargis listen intently to their guests, but neither hesitates to ask sharply pointed questions from his clearly defined position or to good naturedly point out a flawed argument. Somewhat less polite with each other, Turpen often interrupts Hargis, and Hargis responds with zingers when he can wrestle the floor from his fast-talking partner. Despite the verbal tumbling, no one gets truly testy. At a time when most agree the level of American political discourse has sunk so low it has to look up to see down, these two men protect their show and their relationship from the dirt with a three-verb shield. *continued*

"We know, like and respect each other," Turpen says. "Viewers can't believe we can disagree so obviously and still genuinely like each other, but you can passionately argue your point of view and still respect each other, still be friends, not get mad."

Burns elaborates.

"We really have tried to debate and disagree agreeably," he says. "It helps to respect and like the other person, and we don't let the arguments deteriorate into anything personal. We also don't try to convince each other. I'm making my argument to my audience, and he's making his to his."

*Taping stops, and Henry moves off camera to watch the second segment of the show in which the opposites go party lance to party lance. Turpen sticks it to Republican Vice President Dick Cheney as a liability for Bush's 2004 campaign. Hargis argues he is an asset. Turpen trumpets that Democratic Henry's popularity is at 70 percent in a recent poll and asks gleefully, "Have we ever had a more popular governor?" Hargis answers tersely: "Keating." The rapid-fire exchange continues, Ogle popping in to redirect as he sees fit.*

*"One of these days, we need to set up a boxing ring and have you do the show in it," Ogle says to the political palookas when the cameras stop rolling and Henry is re-taking his seat for the show's wrap-up segment.*

Hargis and Turpen, who serve on OU's Political Communication Center Advisory Board, recently donated 383 "Flashpoint" tapes, 1993-2002, to the Julian P. Kanter Political Commercial Archive. Director Leroy Bridges says that the tapes help preserve Oklahoma's political story.

"While the tapes are not yet catalogued, with future funding we hope to make them available to scholars, political practitioners, researchers and students," he says. "The wide range of local and national political figures on the show and the issues discussed weekly for a dozen years give the tapes great historical value."

Hargis knows what riches the tapes contain.

"I've often wished we could go back and see the personality of [early governors] Bob Kerr or Alfalfa Bill Murray," he says. "Every significant Oklahoma politician and a good number of national ones have been on this show. We have an archive of people's personalities that the shows provide in some depth. Sometimes we know we have too much nonsense, and sometimes we have too much substance, but people become familiar with the issues watching us."

*The taping ends. Henry and his entourage leave the arena amid some final verbal thrusts and parries. Although some exchanges have been a shade snippy, not one of those wearing a tasteful charcoal gray suit—this jesting joust's suit of armor—rides off upset. A cameraman tells the team that the producer needs a taped promo. The one-minute bit is for a young academics program. As the tape rolls, the men talk extemporaneously and earnestly on the importance of learning. Then comes the first jab.*

*"Many people don't know that Mike was an honor student," Hargis deadpans. "He spent a lot of time saying, 'Yes, your honor. No, your honor.'"*

*"Well, maybe I did get in a little trouble," Turpen feints before delivering his counterpunchline. "You know, my family came to Oklahoma*

*in a covered wagon, and if you could see my family you'd know why the wagon was covered."*

*A couple more encouraging words about doing well in school, and the cameraman gives the wrap sign.*

Whether providing a freely given promo for a good cause, taping a freewheeling debate on "Flashpoint" or delivering a free-form joke fest during their road show, the funny guys with the serious political goals are always on: on cue, on time and on target.

*Free-lance writer Kathryn Jenson White is an assistant professor of journalism in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication.*



Steve Slaney/Oklahoma Heritage Association

For the past three years, the rapid-fire quips of Hargis, left, and Turpen, have made them the ideal choice as masters of ceremony for the Oklahoma Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony, one of their many off-camera gigs throughout the state.