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WHY DO HOUSE REPUBLICANS WANT TO PICK A FIGHT WITH MEDIA?

It looks as though the boys and girls of the Legislature — more specifically the Republican leaders in the House of Representatives — are at it again, acting like a bunch of petulant, thumb-sucking five-year-olds. The source of their snit fit? The state's media, of course.

Most of my career has involved dealing with the media and politicians, and I must tell you that this current crop of Republicans is as clueless as a fence post on maintaining good media relations.

For starters, the House recently voted to ban reporters from the floor while the House is in session. Under the old rules, reporters were permitted to come onto the floor briefly to seek an interview with a lawmaker outside the chamber. House Speaker Glenn Richardson (R-Hiram) introduced a resolution to ban reporters from the floor during the period from 30 minutes before the House convenes until adjournment. Not even during the reign of the benevolent dictator, former Speaker of the House Tom Murphy, was such a tactic employed to restrict media access.

According to insiders at the Capitol, Richardson's name appeared as the author of the resolution restricting the press, but it was not his original idea, nor was he said to be particularly upset with the media. It was Majority Leader Jerry Keen (R-St. Simons) who took the initiative in the matter. But the Speaker's name on a resolution guarantees its passage.

Keen said the U.S. Congress and Georgia's Senate do not allow the media access to the floor, and neither should the House. He says the move will "maintain order and the proper atmosphere for debate." I think it has more to do with the fact that Keen and the rest of the Republican leadership can't stand the heat, so they are making the press get out of the kitchen.

According to various sources, Keen also got his moral knickers in a wad over a spoof of the Republican leadership at the venerable Cracker Crumble, sponsored by the Georgia Press Association. The Crumble is an evening of good-natured ribbing of the state's politicians, and the proceeds for the event go to a good cause — scholarships for budding young journalists. I have participated in most of the Cracker Crumbles as an emcee, a part of the cast or an attendee. Every politician worth his or her salt in the state has been on the receiving end of well-slung barbs. It is considered a badge of honor to get zinged, and it has all been great fun. That is, until this year when Keen was found to be humor-impaired.

Some members of the House are reportedly scratching their heads wondering why Speaker Richardson, already facing intense press scrutiny over his personal affairs, is allowing Keen to risk offending the Georgia Press Association's member papers over such a silly matter. I'm scratching my head at why they want to pick a fight with the press in the first place.

I've said it before, but I am going to have to say it again: The media are a pass-through to the public. This paper and all the papers in the state — large and small — have an obligation to report to you on the doings of the Legislature. One way to judge the performance of our elected officials is by what we read and see in the media. Making the media's job harder than it already is and bullying reporters is precisely the wrong way to go.

A lot of critical issues are facing our state, and you and I are the ultimate judges of how well our politicians do in managing those issues. If we don't like their results, we will send them home and bring a new crop to town. As Democrats learned the hard way, there are no lifetime appointments in the Legislature.

If House Republicans from Speaker Glenn Richardson and Majority Leader Jerry Keen on through to the newest member don't learn how to coexist with the press and quit acting like petulant, thumb-sucking five-year-olds, they aren't going to be in the majority very long. In fact, they aren't going to be in office very long.