

Speaking in Worcester, Mike Barnicle decries trend in politics

By Mark Sullivan CORRESPONDENT

WORCESTER — President Obama has an "impossible job," veteran print and broadcast journalist Mike Barnicle said Wednesday after a presidential visit to the city.

Both the business of politics and the business of journalism have changed over the past 20 years and not for the better, Mr. Barnicle, a former longtime columnist for The Boston Globe, now a regular on MSNBC's "Morning Joe," said in an interview before speaking at a dinner of the Worcester Economic Club at the College of the Holy Cross.

"I don't think either business is as good as it used to be," said Mr. Barnicle, in Worcester on the same day as President Obama, who was the commencement speaker at Worcester Technical High School four miles across town.

"Politics used to be a lot better because things actually got done," said the Worcester-born journalist, who rose to prominence for his social and political commentary as a columnist for the Globe from 1973 to 1998.

In today's "age of polarization," Mr. Barnicle said, "many members of Congress don't know one another. They sit on opposite sides of the aisle, they lead separate lives, they don't know one another's families. They're governed by the money in politics; they're always campaigning."

The newspaper business likewise isn't what it was, said Mr. Barnicle, who recalled running down City Hall news items as a Fitchburg teenager for the Telegram & Gazette's northern Worcester County bureau.

"Now you get news everywhere," he said. "You get news on your belt buckle. There is no more news. As soon as it happens, everyone knows about it, and then they tweet it and they text it. You've got 506 cable channels. Everyone's a columnist; everyone's a blogger."

"The old days of stop the presses, interrupting programs with bulletins, that still occurs once in a while, but people know (already). That's a good thing that people know, but what do they know?"

"I mean, TV news is skywriting — poof, it's gone."

President Obama "certainly has the will," but "he can't get anything done" — for example, on reducing gun violence after repeated school shootings — in the current polarized political climate in Washington, Mr. Barnicle said.

He said this week's congressional primary vote in Virginia, in which Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor was defeated in a victory for opponents of immigration reform, may push Republican candidates further away from political compromise.

"Does it mean that absolutely nothing gets done for the next three years? Probably. Does it mean that several in the field looking for the Republican nomination for president will be talking like crazy people? Probably. Will it mean that a huge percentage of Republican candidates for congressional seats will be running on the premise that they want to go to Washington not to govern? Probably. It's not good for us."

Yet Mr. Barnicle said the country is fundamentally strong. "Bring it on. It's a bold new future."

From the Worcester Telegram