

“Politics of blame” game diminishes us all

By Jim Nowlan

I fear that the 2018 election contests for governor and legislature, already underway, will be ugly, brutal affairs. Unprecedented millions of dollars will be focused laser-like on convincing voters that the opposition bears all the blame for the incredible mess the state is in, with nary a sou spent on discussion of constructive, though painful, options for getting us out of our mess. If I am right about this, we will all come out of the process feeling a little grimy and less positive about our state. All this during our bicentennial celebration.

My fears are based on three factors that will combine for a toxic brew.

First, voters are at present blaming Gov. Rauner, House Speaker Madigan and state lawmakers in roughly equal doses, from what I gather. I recently finished teaching a short-course on Illinois politics at Bradley University to 65 “mature” citizens in a lifelong learning program.

After discussing our budget problems, I asked these generally well-educated, successful folks whom they blamed for the mess. With a tad more of the blame pinned on long-serving Democratic House speaker Mike Madigan, the class members otherwise spread the blame across all the elected officials in rather equal dollops, saying in effect, “a pox on all of their houses.”

Second, rumors from good sources are swirling that Gov. Rauner will devote two to three times more than the \$50 million he has already committed to winning re-election and also to flipping the state legislature from Dem to GOP majorities.

The Democrat majorities in the General Assembly gerrymandered legislative districts so favorably to their party in 2011 that I doubt all the gold at Fort Knox could turn the legislature Republican in 2018. But, hey, I said all along that Trump was just a flash in the pan. Madigan will put the muscle on his interest groups to match Rauner's personal wealth, unsuccessfully, I'm guessing. But both sides will use their big money on vicious, personal ads to try to destroy the personas of opponents.

They will do this because such ads have worked with the public in the past.

Third, red ink is gushing across Illinois state budget spread sheets, with simple unpaid bills now amounting to \$1,000 per man, woman and child in the state. [As I have written in this space, spending at present outpaces revenues by an amount equal to more than one-quarter of our general funds spending.]

To right the ship of state will require, for a few years at least, eye-popping tax increases. But the public doesn't believe that.

During a class exercise on balancing the budget, my class members largely focused their efforts on cutting waste and corruption and reducing pension costs. This, even though I told them savings in those areas were quite limited, the latter because of court decisions saying the pension costs had to be paid.

[Gov. Rauner even sent out a public letter recently saying he hoped Illinois would solve its budget problems without a tax increase.]

As a result of all the above, neither side in the 2018 election Battle of Armageddon dares be the first to talk seriously about necessary tax increases. And so, we may go on until after the 2018 election without a real budget. Incredible, unforgivable.

And thus, the game will be blame!

I have written that I think Gov. Rauner is largely, not wholly, to blame for the lack of a budget; after all, our state constitution directs him to present a balanced budget to the legislature every year, which he hasn't done.

But, a newcomer to politics, Rauner sure cannot be blamed for the pension albatross that burdens us, without which we wouldn't even have a budget problem.

For the pension mess, Rauner's nemesis Speaker Madigan is the public face, as he has been a dominant political force across the several decades during which the problem festered.

I am afraid there is no stopping this counterproductive, hyper-focused "blame train." It's the way of politics today.

I am reading a biography of 18th Century English politician and political thinker Edmund Burke. You might call Burke the grandfather of both modern conservatism as well as of political parties. Burke would be appalled by the politics of blame, I think. He favored a balance of powers—and responsibilities—among the King, Lords and Commons. To justify their wealth and favored position, the aristocracy had a duty to serve and lead.

I always thought of leadership as the drawing together of people in pursuit of common objectives, rather than of polarizing us.

There may be a time to come when such leaders will arise. I think they would be widely welcomed.