

SNG-Nowlan-curbing corruption-6-27-11 (620 words)

Can corruption stain be erased over time?

By Jim Nowlan

Rare is the person who enters politics planning to be corrupt, yet since 1970 more than 1,000 public officials in Illinois have been convicted of public corruption, according to Prof. Dick Simpson at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Why are so many of us measured for striped suits when that isn't our objective? And can we do anything about Illinois' reputation as a corrupt state?

First, I think that indeed over the past century our culture has developed an underlying sense that, for some of us, if we can take advantage of government, it's the thing to do, as everyone else does it.

For example, in an earlier column I mentioned to my students at the University of Illinois, two-thirds of whom say, semester after semester, that they would opt for a bribe to get a brother out of a particularly burdensome DUI charge. The students say, "Everyone else does it, and we'd be played the fools for not doing so for our brother."

Second, we simply don't think about the ethics of our actions. When I entered the Illinois legislature as a young man in the late 1960s, I had not previously thought about the fact that private gain could be made at public expense (my simple definition of corruption). I could easily have gone along with the way some people played the game and accepted "contributions" at about the same time as actions on bills.

Fortunately, in my freshman year the late George O'Brien (a freshman legislator like me, and later a congressman) sent copies of the play "A Man for All Seasons" to all

his fellow freshman. The play is about Thomas More, who rejected King Henry VIII's request for a divorce. More stood on principle and paid the ultimate price with his head.

Though far removed from the Illinois General Assembly, the play struck me like a thunderbolt. There are indeed matters of principle at play in politics, and be aware when they arise. I credit that simple gift by George O'Brien as possibly separating me from the fate of two of my former college roommates, both of whom spent time in prison later in life.

Sometimes it is maybe difficult to stand up to a corrupt system. More than 100 Cook County court officials were convicted of bribery and related charges in the 1980s in Operation Greylord. Some may have lacked the fortitude to challenge the system in which they became caught up.

And maybe some can't resist the temptation for financial gain based on inside knowledge or actions, and figure they won't be caught. In this day, it is best to assume that everything will be found out!

Whatever the reasons, can anything be done to erase the corruption stain that sullies the battered image of Illinois? I contend the stain costs us in jobs and economic development from businessmen who don't want to deal with what they think they might find in our state, whether perception or reality.

Cultural attitudes and behavior can change. I think of society's attitudes toward drinking and driving. When I was young, little thought was given to the issue. As a result of major campaigns by groups like Mothers against Drunk Driving and changes in law, public behavior has changed significantly and deaths on the road are down because of it.

Similarly, again when I was young, smoking was popular and “cool.” Today it is definitely not, and our collective lifespan has been increased.

So I think that if we can mount major public awareness campaigns about thinking ethically before acting in public life (and in business life as well), we can over the years alter behavior.

Maybe it’s as simple as, “How do you want your children and grandchildren to think of you?”