

SNG-Good guys don't always win-12-22-14

The good guy (or lady) doesn't always win

By Jim Nowlan

The late Illinois comptroller Judy Baar Topinka and I used to tell people that we were kicked out of the famed Pump Room restaurant in Chicago. Actually, we had so much fun chatting over a long lunch there that the *maitre d* had to ask us to leave so they could get ready for the dinner crowd.

A “cheap Bohemian,” as she called herself, Judy Baar always took her accordion along. Once, not too many years ago, Judy was in my hometown of Toulon for the annual Old Settlers Day parade.

Our eccentric GOP chair, a retired judge and tuba player par excellence in the community band, asked Judy on the spur of the moment to join him in an accordion-tuba duet, which she acceded to with great gusto and the delight of onlookers.

More important, according to a friend of mine who has worked under several state comptrollers, Judy was the only one who ever left her Capitol office to visit her employees spread across several Springfield locations. Indeed, she took them boxes of doughnuts on her visits.

The press loved her. She smiled at herself (a trait not conspicuous among preening pols), talked straight, and provided good quotes—she referred to 2006 opponent Rod Blagojevich as “weasel eyes.”

But if everybody loved her, why was she beaten so badly (50-39 percent) in 2006 by a governor whom followers of state politics expected to be indicted any day for corruption?

First, few follow state politics. It is the forgotten step-child of national and local news. So, Judy Baar, as many referred to her, was little known to the public and thus vulnerable to being defined by her opponent.

Second, Judy Baar was a social liberal in a party that had become dominated by opponents of abortion rights and certainly of gay rights. Many on the Right might have skipped her box on the ballot in 2006.

Third, she was softened up in a four-way primary in 2006 by vicious ads from her opponents. I can't remember the ads, but I recall that a couple of them were pulled off the air by stations for being over the top. Judy won the primary with only 38 percent of the vote.

Most important, she was ridiculed into a cruel parody of her real self by thousands of TV ads from Blagojevich who spent \$23 million, in large measure from people who did business with the state.

I don't see much television, but I recall one ad that showed Judy dancing a polka with former governor George Ryan.

With less than half as much money to spend, Judy failed to respond in kind.

I say "most important," even though political scientists are unsure of how much impact negative, attack ads have on voter behavior.

Brian Gaines, a savvy student of voting at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, thinks the attack ads probably have small, net "demobilization effects" (driving moderates away from the polls).

Political operatives believe the negative ads have more than marginal impact; otherwise, the ads would not be so ubiquitous in American politics.

I ran the successful re-election campaign of U.S. Senator Charles Percy way back in 1978. In the summer of that year, our opponent began running negative ads and at about the same time our polling showed a sharp drop in Percy's likely vote.

Campaign managers live and act on anecdotal evidence like that.

My point is that, for whatever reasons, the good guy doesn't always win, especially in elections where voters have little but negative ads to guide them. As A. Lincoln so famously said, "You can fool all of the voters some of the time. . . ."

I think money plays an out-sized role in elections, yet the nation's high court has decreed that money is speech and thus cannot be limited.

Fortunately, we have a two-stage election process, with primaries winnowing the fields of the major parties, thus increasing the chances of coming up with two acceptable nominees for the fall elections.

And we have the checks and balances that American government pros have hammered into students since our founding. These worked splendidly when Rod Blagojevich was impeached by the state House, convicted by the Senate and removed from office after he became an embarrassment.

So, our system works, if imperfectly and clunkily at times, but the good guy (or lady) doesn't always win.