

SNG-Nowlan-This election all about money-2-6-12

This election all about money

By Jim Nowlan

The Chicago Club is the refuge of CEOs, hedge fund managers and lead partners of big law firms. Mortals need not apply. Since the late 1800s, the Marshall Fields and George Pullmans of the Chicago scene have considered the club their home for social and business tête-à-têtes.

Women dared not darken the doors of the Chicago Club until the 1970s, when Hannah Gray became president of the University of Chicago, whose head had a standing membership. Located in a massive fortress-like red stone building, the club is located at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Van Buren Street in the south business district of Chicago, near the Hilton Towers.

A plutocrat friend of mine couldn't use his \$5,000 luncheon ticket this past week to hear Karl Rove, the evil genius (some would say) of political campaigns, speak to a group of 100 Republicans and plutocrats. So I went in his stead, the price of admission about \$4,900 higher than my limit.

The club carpets are in gold with muted patterns, soft enough to sleep on. There are chandeliers everywhere, probably even in the men's rooms, though I forgot to look up.

At the reception I saw several GOP functionaries whom I knew, probably also there on complimentary tickets. We sipped diet colas in tall glasses; no wine was available, which surprised me. Lunch was neat but not too special. Salad included lightly

poached pears, sliced thin and swirled alongside arugula lettuce, shredded carrots and goat's cheese, all topped with a rich dressing ladled by the attentive wait staff. Lunch was turkey breast served in pie-shaped pieces for some reason, accompanied by whipped sweet potatoes served in a hollowed out red potato skin cups. Cookies for dessert.

Karl Rove led the turnabout of Texas from a Democratic state to one now dominated by the GOP. He was George W. Bush's political guru in both Texas and Washington. He is a master of grass roots, data-driven campaigning combined with hold-no-prisoner, destroy thine enemy negative advertising.

Karl loves the political combat; after all, politics is football without the muscles. Karl and I first met in 1970, when he worked for an unsuccessful Illinois US Senate candidate and I was a back-bench state legislator. I recall a prank in which he lifted some letterheads of opponent Alan Dixon and made a flyer that promised free food, beer and ladies to Skid Row bums to attend a Dixon event in Chicago.

At the luncheon, which raised \$300,000 for the state GOP, Karl exhorted those present to give 'til it hurts—first to candidates and the party, then when limits of \$40,000 per couple are reached, to Super PACs (political action committees) like his American Crossroads, for which he plans to raise \$300 million.

President Obama's campaign hopes to raise \$1 billion!

Money has been a key element in politics since George Washington plied his Virginia constituents with free whiskey. But the ante has been upped dramatically since US Supreme Court decisions okayed unlimited contributions by individuals, corporations and unions to “independent” Super PACs, which are generally run by the candidates'

former staffers. Money is speech and corporations are persons, said the court. Money also equals political power.

In the present GOP presidential primary season, one can watch candidates go down in the polls after barrages of expensive negative ads.

As in late republican Rome, where immensely wealthy senators curried support of the masses with bread and circuses, so today the super-wealthy manipulate public perceptions of candidates with their negative ads. The capable, public-spirited little guy can't play the political game without first gaining the support of the wealthy.

What to do? An amendment to the US Constitution is the only way to override Supreme Court decisions. And language to limit money in politics would be difficult to craft for a document of principles like our constitution.

What can be done now is to require PACs to disclose in real time its big-dollar contributors, so at least the public can know who is trying to manipulate them.

Money used to be one factor in helping political parties promote their candidates. Now, access to big money is the gatekeeper to political success, and parties amount to little. It shouldn't be that way.