

Let's Put a Lid On It

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor
June 2019

The best candidate may not have the biggest war chest



One of the George Orwell's underappreciated works was an early novel, *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*. The plot revolves around Gordon Comstock, a flailing ad agency copywriter who tries to rebel against what he calls society's perverse worship of the "Money-God."

"What he realized, and more clearly as time went on," wrote Orwell, "was that money-worship has been elevated into a religion. Perhaps it is the only real religion -- the only felt religion -- that is left to us. Money is what God used to be. Good and evil have no meaning any longer except failure and success."

It is undeniable that Orwell's dreaded Money-God has triumphed in modern America. Every nook and cranny of contemporary culture is drenched in the bias of judging our fellow citizens on money, status, and demonstrations of wealth.

Money suffuses and corrupts our political system as well. Candidates must now spend huge sums to get elected, and once they do, well-funded special interests spend huge sums to

Let's Put a Lid On It

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor
June 2019

influence how they'll vote.

Take newly elected U.S. Sen. Rick Scott. Before becoming our governor in 2010, Scott served as CEO of Columbia/HCA during the time the hospital group perpetrated massive Medicare fraud, resulting in a \$1.7 billion fine. He left the company a few months after the Justice Department investigation was made public.

Without the shame gene -- a common characteristic among our political class -- Scott nevertheless ran for governor, self-financing his campaign to the tune of \$75 million. With enough slickly produced advertisements, dim-witted Floridians overlooked his corporation's fraudulent history and elected him as governor...and then re-elected him.

With the morally bankrupt Donald Trump gearing up for a \$1 billion re-election campaign, there's no end in sight. To visualize a billion dollars: If one-dollar bills were stacked until they totaled \$1 billion, the pile would reach 67.9 miles.

Alas, the campaign finance cancer has spread to the local level, right down to our Miami Shores. To date, the 2019 election season has gone down in village history as the most expensive ever, with official reporting expenses of \$127,000. That election season also introduced us to "dark money" attack ads, of undetermined amounts, against council candidate Christian Ulvert.

But before we delve into the last campaign, a broader trend of village elections is worthy of reflection. A short ten years ago, in 2009, campaign expenses totaled approximately \$16,500 spread across five village council candidates. Reported donations came in at about \$3000 per candidate.

But just two years later, in 2011, eight village candidates more than doubled that total, collectively raising around \$37,000. Former village Mayor Jim McCoy alone raised more than \$10,000. And in 2013, the late Herta Holly also raised \$10,000 for her council seat against a field of six who collectively raised \$36,500.

Let's Put a Lid On It

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor
June 2019

In 2015 we saw the emergence of two fundraising heavyweights: attorneys Mac Glinn and Steven Zelkowitz, who raised approximately \$29,000 and \$34,000, respectively. The six candidates that year raised a whopping \$108,000.

But this year's election-year spending was record breaking. A total of \$127,000 was spent for the April 10 election and subsequent April 30 run-off. What's remarkable is that 73 percent of that total was raised by just two of the seven council candidates. Newly elected Mayor Crystal Wagar raised \$37,000. And council candidate Christian Ulvert, leaning on fundraising connections as a longtime political consultant, raised a historic amount of \$56,000. Ulvert's campaign was felt everywhere throughout the village, with campaign signs, weekly mailers, text messages, advertisements on social media platforms, house parties -- even block parties -- promoting the candidate.

But live by the sword, die by the sword, and the political path Ulvert blazed created enemies. Shortly after declaring his candidacy, a shadowy group called Citizens for Ethical and Effective Leadership (or CFEEL) began bombarding the village electorate with flyers and messages attacking Ulvert being anti-environment, soft on Cuba and Venezuela, and even being anti-dog. Five separate anti-Ulvert flyers were created and mailed to area voters. While Ulvert had to operate his campaign within some reasonable bounds of truth, the faceless folks behind CFEEL apparently had no such constraints.

Unfortunately for Ulvert, CFEEL's attacks and a general sense that his campaign was over-the-top for the tiny village resulted in his first-round tie with longtime former councilman Stephen Loffredo for the fourth council seat. Each of them received 893 votes, and then Ulvert suffered a 200-vote loss in the runoff to Loffredo.

To have witnessed so much money spent at a rapidly escalating rate over a decade on a local political position that pays a dollar a year is to witness absurdity. Consider that Ulvert "spent" about \$63 per April 10 first-round vote (his 893 votes), whereas re-elected Councilman Jonathan Meltz, who raised a paltry \$3000, "spent" less than three dollars for each of the 1025 he garnered. Perhaps it's a testament to voters who have seen through the money fog and assessed their candidates on other merits.

But then there's always next time. Recall that we went from \$16,000 a decade ago to \$127,000 today. Can anyone dismiss the possibility of some future candidate raising \$100,000? Or of the collective council campaigns totaling half a million? Again, all this for a position that pays a

Let's Put a Lid On It

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor
June 2019

measly dollar a year.

Councilwoman Alice Burch has begun to explore a legislative fix to the issue. Unfortunately, campaign finance limitations have largely been eviscerated by the Supreme Court's atrocious Citizens United decision.

Perhaps this is an issue for us to self-enforce. A voluntary pledge by candidates to limit all contributions to no more than \$100, coupled with a \$10,000 cap on overall campaign spending, would go a long way toward remedying the money madness. Individual campaigns should cost no more than a dollar per the number of village residents. So we'd see campaign caps per candidate of \$10,000 for Miami Shores, \$3000 for Biscayne Park, and \$2500 for El Portal.

At the end of Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, the main character settles into his marketing career and discards his youthful idealism. "It occurred to him," writes Orwell, "that he was merely repeating the destiny of every human being. Everyone rebels against the money-code, and everyone sooner or later surrenders."

But putting a cap on excessive campaign spending has nothing to do with waging a futile war on Orwell's Money-God, or creating absolute egalitarianism. It's about the role of money in politics, and finding its proper place. Let's aspire to a future where how much anyone earns (or raises) doesn't equate with their worth.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com