Benediction
September 25, 2003

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When former Pennsylvania State Auditor General Al Benedict died in Florida recently at age 74, few noticed. There was a hand full of brief stories, but little other observance. Benedict who riveted media attention in the 1980's was all but ignored in death. It probably should not have been that way.

For Al Benedict deserves to be remembered--less perhaps for what he accomplished during his life--than for what he came to symbolize in Pennsylvania political life. The latter, unfortunately for him, will probably dominate his legacy, and it is a legacy he would not be proud to recall. Benedict began political life as a fresh and dynamic figure--he ended it as an ex con, publicly confessed of a multitude of official corruption.

A former Erie City Controller and broadcast personality, Benedict burst into state politics in 1976, elected statewide to his first of two terms as Auditor General. Milton Shapp was finishing his tenure as governor, Jimmy Carter was entering the White House, and Al Benedict looked too many like a future governor.

It was not to be. Instead, he became embroiled in an infamous job selling racket and other influence peddling schemes that eventually got him a six-year federal prison sentence. Benedict pleaded guilty in 1988 to multiple counts of tax evasion and racketeering. His plea agreement required him to acknowledge participation in a job-selling scheme, as well as to authorizing no bid contracts in exchange for bribes and kickbacks.

Al Benedict was a corrupt official. About that, there is no dispute. Nevertheless, what was remarkable about the 1980's Benedict case was the banality of it all. In Benedict's time, it was far from unusual for a Pennsylvania public official to be caught in some slick influence peddling scheme or other act of official corruption.

In fact, corruption was by then an old tradition in Pennsylvania, with roots well back into the 19th century's infamous "age of boodle." If not quite the norm, it was expected as a necessary part of politics. Pennsylvania U.S. Senator Simon Cameron probably summed up the prevailing ethos with his classic definition of an "honest politician" as "someone who when he is bought stays bought."

Certainly, by any definition, corruption was widespread in Pennsylvania when Benedict entered office in 1976. During this period, the U.S. Justice Department declared that Pennsylvania was the most corrupt among the 50 states. Moreover, the Shapp administration, then winding down, was doing its best to maintain the distinction.

In the 1970s and into the early 1980s, dozens of state and local politicians pleaded guilty or were convicted of corruption. Nor did this sorry tale end with Benedict. He, in fact, lost his last election in 1984 to state Treasurer Bud Dwyer--himself later convicted of influence peddling and soliciting kickbacks for no bid contracts.

But, in retrospect, Benedict's times and his crimes marked the modern high tide for political corruption in Pennsylvania. Former federal prosecutor Republican Dick Thornburgh, who ran a squeaky-clean eight-year administration, followed Shapp in the governor's office. Thornburgh was followed by Democrat Bob Casey for
eight years who also finished his two terms without major corruption, as did his successors Republicans Tom Ridge and Mark Schweiker.

The record is not perfect. A former Attorney General, for example, went to jail in the early 1990's for fund raising corruption, and a few state legislators left office under the cloud of a conviction for acts of political corruption. However, largely Pennsylvania politics are relatively clean today. Not since Shapp left office in 1979 has there been a major corruption scandal in the executive branch of government.

Indeed, the kind of scandal we are more likely to see these days are what we have referred to earlier as "Oprahization scandals" or scandals involving the personal behavior of elected officials. A veritable raft of these occurred in the state legislature a couple of years ago.

So, what has changed Pennsylvania politics so markedly in the past quarter century? There probably is no single answer to that question. But certainly three factors stand out as partial explanations for the remarkable lack of official corruption found in modern Pennsylvania.

- The first of these factors involves the relationship between political institutions and government employment. Patronage practices that inspired much of the earlier corruption are mostly a bygone practice. And the "court house gangs" that bred corrupt behavior have disappeared, or are mere shells of their former existence. Day-to-day politics no longer supplies either opportunity or motive for corrupt behavior.
- A second factor responsible for low corruption can be explained in the way campaigns are now funded. When corruption was rife, much of the corruption was motivated by the desire to raise campaign funds. But, Pennsylvania politicians today have become talented and tenacious legal fundraisers. And, Pennsylvania's campaign finance laws are among the most permissive in the country. A modern Pennsylvania politician does not need to be corrupt to raise large amounts of legal campaign money.
- Finally, corruption has declined in Pennsylvania because the people of Pennsylvania will no longer tolerate it. That was the lesson of Dick Thornburgh's victory in 1978, and a lesson remembered by Bob Casey in the 1980's and Tom Ridge into the 1990's. That understanding is now deeply embedded in the political psyche of Pennsylvania's politicians. Voters are now likely to punish at the polls any party or any politician that is shown to be pervasively corrupt.

Therefore, Al Benedict's passing--even though ignored--is still an occasion to note the passing of significant official corruption itself from the Pennsylvania political scene. "Big Al," as he was known to close friends, is a tragic figure in state politics who never realized his promise. Nevertheless, he helped to teach a whole generation of politicians that the age of boodle was really over in Pennsylvania --and that corruption would no longer be tolerated. That wasn't what he set out to do. But we owe him for it anyway.

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