

Bonusgate: A Different Kind of Political Corruption

July 17, 2008

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

It has all the elements of a sensational fiction thriller—an allusive title, "Bonusgate," cold cash in the form of illicit bonuses handed out to both witting and unwitting accomplices, titillating sexual encounters, dirt surreptitiously uncovered and used on political enemies, and all mixed well with a cast of unlikely characters and comedic hijinks worthy of Hollywood's finest.

Are we describing the latest crime novel published just in time for summer reading on hot, crowded beaches? Alas, no! Hot reading this may be, but fictional it is not. It is all too real. And the real world crime alleged at its core has so far led to the indictments of 12 Pennsylvania House Democratic representatives and staffers.

But if Bonusgate has grabbed our attention, it isn't yet clear just what all the attention is about. What exactly is Bonusgate, what are its implications, and what might it foreshadow for state politics?

So far most interest has focused on two allegations: that illicit bonuses using public funds were paid to some House Democratic caucus employees for political campaigning and that extensive campaign work was done on state time by some caucus employees. But these charges capture only part of the matter. The scope of alleged wrongdoing is much broader. Indeed according to two grand jury presentments, the political practices carried out in the caucus over the past few years represent a "new campaign scheme" funded by public dollars.

It is alleged that the architects of Bonusgate built and operated a fully functioning campaign organization embedded within the Democratic caucus. At its highpoint it included extensive field work, strategic and tactical planning, opposition research, fundraising, and the use of email and computer databases. All or much of this extensive campaign apparatus was run on public property by public employees using public equipment and other resources.

The system was apparently so extensive that 458 employees "volunteered" to participate, many understanding that doing so was compulsory if they wished to continue their careers. In one single legislative race, a stunning 177 individual staffers became involved at some point in the campaign.

Nor was the operation limited to the legislative sphere of state politics. This sophisticated political machine pasted onto the very fabric of the legislative process had implications far beyond legislative elections. Its tentacles spread widely—extending to a U.S. Senate campaign, a state gubernatorial election, and even a presidential race.

It successfully kept Independent candidate Carl Romanelli off the U.S. Senate ballot in 2006. Then the very same political operation, it is alleged, was employed against gubernatorial candidates Lynn Swann and Bill Scranton in 2006. Earlier it helped successfully challenge the state presidential nomination petition of Ralph Nader in 2004, thus helping John Kerry carry the state.

None of this is penny ante politics. Indeed the scope of it is breathtaking. The vast political machine developed probably rivaled any legitimate political organization created at county or state level in the past 40 years. And

for many years, it was maintained in secrecy, because the state's own "Right to Know Law" did not apply to the legislature.

All of this raises many disturbing questions. Three are particularly compelling:

1. Why, after an interval of almost three decades, has major public corruption again reared its head in Pennsylvania? In the 1970s the U.S. Justice Department declared that Pennsylvania was the most corrupt among the 50 states. But not since that time has widespread public corruption been a problem in Pennsylvania. Does Bonusgate signal a regression to that earlier era? Is this a return to the bad old days?
2. And is Bonusgate really systemic? Is it a virulent political virus spreading through the system and infecting the vital organs of state government, or is Bonusgate instead the tawdry and venal idiosyncratic acts of a few who are neither representative nor numerous among the political class? How widespread is this thing?
3. And where do the solutions lie to prevent future Bonusgates? Are they to be found in the institutional reforms that post-2005 pay raise reformers have advocated—like term limits, stronger lobbyist regulation, campaign finance reform, a ban on gifts to legislators and their staffs, or even a constitutional convention?

Answers to all these questions will come. But it is clear that even institutional reforms are not silver bullets that can end by themselves political corruption and misbehavior in the state. If we wish to do that, we must confront the toxic effects in state politics of the demand for campaign money.

In fact one can not long look into this mess without realizing that the pursuit of campaign resources—cash and its equivalent—has led to Bonusgate. More than anything else, the whole sad saga illustrates the unremitting demand for campaign money that dominates modern American politics.

In truth this central role of political money in producing corruption can scarcely be exaggerated. To win elections today, prodigious amounts of campaign resources must be raised and spent. This unrelenting, dogged, and methodical pursuit of cash has been termed the "permanent campaign," and its corrupting influence daily perverts the nation's politics. Bonusgate is a symptom of that problem.

But Bonusgate markedly differs from past corruption in Pennsylvania. Corrupt politicians throughout state history have found many ways to steal and have stolen for many reasons. But historically personal enrichment and financial gain were common motivations for corrupt behavior. Since vigorous parties and abundant patronage provided the campaign resources necessary to run campaigns, crooked politicians of earlier eras were free to steal for themselves, and many did.

And the accused Bonusgate malefactors are different too. Boiled down to its elements, they are accused of creating within state government a campaign organization that performed very similar campaign functions to those that parties and patronage performed in the past.

Unlike earlier corrupt politicians, these modern day villains are mostly stealing to gain power and win elections. They live in an era in which the parties are moribund, the candidate-centered campaign prevails, and the demand for campaign cash grows inexorably even while its traditional sources decline.

It is the pursuit of these campaign resources that drive the behavior of today's corrupt politician—and that is different from past personal, enrichment-oriented corruption. The modes of stealing may be similar, but the motives are very different. Unless we understand this, we can't hope to stop it from happening again.

*Politically Uncorrected*TM is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2008 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.