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Elections or Indictments ... Putting an End to Corruption

By Gary Palmer

In testimony before the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, former Senator Paul Simon (D-IL) stated that gambling "... has more of a history of corruption than any other industry."

The October 4th indictments of eleven individuals, including four Alabama state senators, on charges of public corruption related to gambling legislation is an example of what the late Senator Simon meant. When you look back at the relationships between politicians and gambling interests, what you find is a long and sordid history of public corruption.

Certainly, one of the darkest events in Alabama happened because of gambling corruption in Phenix City. Public officials, starting at the local level in Russell County all the way up to the Alabama Attorney General, aided and abetted this corruption. It took the cold-blooded murder of Albert Patterson by Russell County Chief Deputy Sheriff Albert Fuller to clear out the gambling interests who had bought favor with state and local governing officials.

Many people of Alabama have forgotten the story of Phenix City. Of course, those recently indicted are innocent until proven guilty, but these indictments certainly should

be a wake-up call. When it comes to gambling, it seems inevitable that public corruption will come with it. During the 1800s, gambling-related public corruption became so widespread that practically every state outlawed lotteries and all other forms of gambling. That is why Alabama's State Constitution has such a clear, strong stance against gambling. That is also why for almost 100 years, legal casino gambling was limited to Nevada.

Unfortunately, in the 1980s and 1990s, more and more states turned to lotteries and casinos as revenue to alleviate massive increases in state spending. As gambling once again spread across America, so did gambling-related corruption.

Here is a brief summary of some of the corruption investigations: in 1989, two prominent West Virginia state senators were sent to prison for taking gambling bribes; in 1991, nineteen Arizona legislators were videotaped taking gambling bribes in return for their votes on a gambling bill; in 1992, seventeen South Carolina legislators were convicted on gambling-related corruption charges; in 1995, fifteen Kentucky legislators were either convicted of or pleaded guilty to gambling corruption charges; in 1996, the Missouri Speaker of the House was forced to resign after he came under federal investigation for gambling corruption; in 1997, the Louisiana senator who chaired the senate committee overseeing gambling was convicted and a member of the Louisiana House serving on a similar committee resigned for taking gifts in exchange for using his influence to help video gambling enterprises controlled by two organized crime groups.

The list goes on because more investigations into gambling corruption have taken place in other states in the last few years, including a major investigation of Pennsylvania's elected officials.

In some states, such as South Carolina, the gambling industry emerged in its worst form - video gambling parlors. These joints opened up all over that state to such a degree that there were more places to gamble in South Carolina than there were in Nevada. That was where Alabama was heading until Gov. Bob Riley launched a task force to shut them down.

Alabama has a history of corruption that runs deep and wide in the political infrastructure of this state and it isn't all related to gambling.

In 1992, Republican Governor Guy Hunt was convicted for the misuse of campaign contributions and removed from office. He was later pardoned after being proved innocent. An investigation during the brief administration of Jim Folsom, who succeeded Hunt and was in office for only about two and a half years, resulted in the conviction of

one of his administration staff and two state senators. Former Governor Don Siegelman was convicted of corruption related to campaign contributions to support his lottery. Following that, the chancellor of the Alabama two-year college system, the president of the Alabama Fire College, two state representatives and a state senator were all convicted on corruption charges. Two former state chairmen of the Alabama Democratic Party are currently in federal prison for corruption related to the Jefferson County sewer bond scam. Consequently, Alabama ranks as one of the worst states in the nation for public corruption.

One possible reason there is so much public corruption in our state government is that the corrupt activities often occur away from the legislator's home district. Many legislators come from areas where there is little, if any, scrutiny of their actions. And for many elected officials, there is practically no local media to hold them accountable.

Voters need to be better informed about what their elected officials are doing because, in the end, the best method for cleaning up Alabama politics and government is through elections - vote the corrupt politicians out. We should not have to rely on federal investigators to do it for us.

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