

# Slots Foes Bag a Literary Lion

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What the Maryland slots debate really needs is a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, and luckily, Taylor Branch is up for it.

The historian and author of an acclaimed Martin Luther King Jr. trilogy is on the steering committee for Marylanders United to Stop Slots. By his own account, Branch is pretty much "removed from public life." Why weigh in on this issue?

"Basically, I would say a lifetime spent studying Martin Luther King and the civil rights era steeps you in what democracy requires, because that's basically what the whole civil rights movement is about. What does equal citizenship mean?" he said. "To me, the first rule of the American experience is that we don't play each other for suckers. The government shouldn't play its own citizens for suckers - 'We need public money, and we're going to fleece people who are foolish enough to go in and pull one-armed bandits.'"

Does the pro-slots team have anybody with Branch's intellectual heft on its side?

Fred Puddester, the Maryland Stadium Authority chief who is leading the pro-slots camp, would say this much: "We're going to put together a broad coalition."

Branch said he'd gladly go toe-to-toe with his pro-slots alter ego, should the gambling forces come up with him.

"I'll be very curious if they do. I would like to engage them myself in debate," he said. "You know, the most high-minded argument on the other side has been to save the horseracing industry and the pastoral nature of Maryland."

How 'bout Seabiscuit author Laura Hillenbrand?

Branch laughed that off.

"Maybe Chris Buckley, who wrote, Thank You for Smoking, Bill Buckley's son," he said, adding, "I don't even know if it's a conservative issue or a liberal issue. ... Slots are corrupt and anti-religious ... [but] if you're a conservative, it's better than taxes. To liberals, it's regressive, exploitive, but we need public money."