

The Baltimore Sun, Editorial, March 28, 2004

## Slots and democracy

"ONE-ARMED BANDITS" suggests ashtrays, long faces, monotony and clanging coins. Whether or not slot machines clash with your vision of Maryland's future, the image rings true for the momentous debate in Annapolis. Beneath a loud collision of gritty interests, ethical scruples and urgent public needs, the structure of free government itself lies more quietly at risk. Bedrock civic principles make the slots issue not only a turning point for the state but a vital responsibility for every citizen.

Three founding notions of American governance are fundamentally at stake in our slots decision. For me, after many years spent studying and writing American history, they have crystallized with daunting simplicity from the patriotic roots of the civil rights movement. The ideas run true from Charles Carroll and James Madison to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and from them to aspirations for democracy in China or Iraq. The most basic is self-government. During the long struggle to ratify the Constitution, James Madison called upon "every votary of freedom to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government." That premise was manifestly absurd to the known world of kings, hierarchy and force. It made infant America a laughingstock. It remains dubious to this day in many hearts and nations

Self-government demands both a conservative discipline and a liberal faith in fellow citizens. Although we rarely think of it this way, any addiction is a potential threat to good government. An addict, by definition, is not self-governing. Every addict succumbs to a cheap high that progressively saps strength.

In the slots debate, many have warned that addictive gambling will prey upon the poor and weak, but the state itself must guard against a more pervasive addiction to "found money" and "free revenue." If it looks too good to be true, it probably is. If it seems hard to resist now, saying yes will surely make it grow worse. Addiction is the mother of corruption in people and governments alike. By contrast, self-government requires us all to look beyond the moment and safeguard the integrity of clear choice.

A second principle is public trust. Madison wrote in 1788: "To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty without virtue in the people is a chimerical idea."

We have built the world's pioneer democracy based on horizontal ties between citizen-strangers. Our hidden bonds rise to the surface in crisis, as when we all rose to affirm the firefighters and victims on Sept. 11, 2001, but we also rely on a host of invisible ties for routine transactions, safe travel and fair elections. We believe power turns not on warlords but on the last widow or wino

who may stumble to the polls, which is why we obsessed rightly over Florida in the last presidential election. By diligence and consent, we uphold our compact of equal citizens.

In the slots debate, we must decide whether that compact is compatible with sleight of hand. Our political discourse otherwise values hard work, opportunity, investment, sacrifice, cooperation and fair play. Would state advertising -- the voice of the people -- tell the truth to customers about slots odds and fees? Should the people's representatives play some citizens for suckers? This is no trivial matter. Slot machine messages would become the daily voice of Maryland to thousands among us.

Some say we already deceive and exploit citizens with advertisements for the Maryland Lottery. That may be an argument against the lottery, but it says nothing positive for slots. Most proponents indeed presume moral and political faults. Claiming that slots are no worse than the lottery, they rush past the merits and misgivings on the ground that we are lost already. This approach rationalizes appetite harshly over judgment, which is a classic symptom of cynicism as well as addiction.

The third principle at stake is accountability. Liberals and conservatives have relied upon checks to restrain power or prevent tyranny. Madison was equally intent to establish a balanced division of labor among government branches to accomplish the people's business efficiently.

For Dr. King, accountability also meant a balanced respect for constitutional principles and scriptural exhortations to justice. His rhetoric nearly always put one foot in America's founding creeds and another in the Bible. "One day the South will know," he wrote from the Birmingham jail, "that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream -- and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage."

Maryland must decide whether any slots proposal can meet the test of accountability. By newspaper accounts, there seems to be a gross imbalance. Multitudes are vying to take windfalls from a slots bonanza, but no one pledges a share of the burden. Instead, we would blind ourselves to issues of fairness in meeting public obligations. We would shirk half our duty to balance private rights and public needs by informed consent.

Temptation whispers that slots are an inevitable small step toward fiscal health, and it is certain that many thousands of substantial citizens already know they would never drop a single coin into a slot machine. A predatory tax on the weak would make up the difference for a time, but the greater damage would spread inevitably to us all.

Nothing is inevitable before the vote in Annapolis. Slots proposals fail all three enduring lessons of our democratic experiment. If we exercise self-government, public trust and accountability, we will reject a bad gamble that also threatens Maryland's political health.

*Taylor Branch is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of Parting the Waters, the first book in a trilogy about the American civil rights movement. He lives in Baltimore.*