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COMMENTARY: Welcome to the Caymans

The success of Urban One Casino proves that Richmond remains in dire need of campaign finance reform.

BY CAROL A.O. WOLF

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Virginia has long been described as the Cayman Islands of political campaign financing. And sadly, it won't change until residents demand their representatives in the General Assembly step away from the hog trough of free food, booze and unlimited campaign contributions and pause to remember who elected them and why.

The need to be like Caesar's wife – above reproach – applies to Democrats and Republicans alike.

The ongoing casino controversy in Richmond is the most recent example of the need for reform. As such, it provides a perfect lesson underscoring the need for serious campaign finance reform as well as the need for consequences for violating the rules.

Consider Urban One, the \$560 million casino resort of choice that Mayor Levar Stoney recently presented to City Council in the hope that it will be placed on the ballot in November. One of the investors in the Urban One Casino, Greg Cummings, is also one of three people who created the Black Opportunity Council on Sept. 11, 2020. Within a few days of its founding, the group doled out \$45,000 to local election campaigns. Cummings did not respond to repeated requests for comment by press time.

According to information available on Virginia Public Access Project, the group gave \$10,000 to the campaign of Amy Wentz on Sept. 20, who unsuccessfully ran against 8th District council member Reva Trammell. On Sept. 28, the group gave Stoney \$20,000, and \$5,000 each to Cynthia Newbille, president of City Council representing the 7th District, and Ellen Robertson, representing the 6th District. On Oct. 9, it gave \$2,500 to Katherine Jordan, a candidate for 2nd District seat, and on Oct. 20, it gave \$2,500 to Ann-Frances Lambert who was running for the 3rd District council seat. Both Jordan and Lambert won their races.

The fact that various candidates received money from a group affiliated with the Urban One casino, is troubling to Tad Berman, a longtime activist who scrutinizes the gaming and gambling industry in Virginia on his website, *Virginians for Integrity in Horse Racing and Casino Gambling*.

Berman, a self-described watchdog, has been maintaining his website and blog for more than 10 years. In a recent interview, he explains that he is so fed up with what he sees as a corrupt practice that he fired off a letter to the Virginia Office of the Attorney General with a copy to Richmond city attorney, Haskell Brown. In his letter, Berman requests that the attorney general open an investigation into the Black Opportunity Council, which he describes as “a clandestine organization that was formed in September 2020 by a One Casino investor whose apparent only purpose was to donate money to Richmond City Council members, candidates, and Mayor Stoney in an effort to influence them regarding the One Casino proposal.”

Berman believes that since so many members of Richmond City Council, along with Stoney, received political contributions from One Casino or its investors that at a minimum, members should be forced either recuse themselves from voting or to return the money. Or both.

From his original letter: “By accepting money from the BOC, I feel as though certain council members have compromised their ability to vote objectively. ... on whether to approve or disapprove the One Casino proposal. At the very least, those who accepted donations from the BOC should return that money and recuse themselves from the vote ... I also think this standard should be applied to councilman Michael Jones in regard to a \$5,000 contribution One Casino chairman Alfred Liggins made to him in January.”

At the May 24 City Council meeting, Stoney introduced a presentation on Urban One. The proposal to place the referendum on the November ballot is now scheduled to go to a Richmond City Council committee June 7 from 5 to 6:30 p.m., at which point the date to bring it to a full-City Council meeting will be determined.

It might seem that any elected official with an ounce of integrity who will vote on a matter that could result in financial benefit to a donor should know better than to accept even a free beer or pretzel, much less thousands of dollars. However, while unethical, such action is not illegal in Virginia as long as the elected official declares the contribution. Politicians in Virginia during the last General Assembly session killed legislation that would have prohibited elected officials from using campaign money for personal expenses. The bill, sponsored by Del. Marcus Simon, D-Fairfax, cleared the House of Delegates by unanimous vote but failed to survive the Virginia Senate.

In 2016, Alan Suderman, a reporter with the Associated Press, wrote that “behavior that would get lawmakers locked up in other states or at the federal level is perfectly fine in the Old Dominion.”

Suderman noted that Virginia is the only state where lawmakers can raise unlimited campaign donations from anyone, or any corporation or union, and then spend the money on themselves.

And until Virginia voters demand greater integrity and accountability from elected officials, those officials will continue to think they are in the Cayman Islands.

Correction: Katherine Jordan won the 2nd district seat not the 1st.

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Opinion: Lessons in Historical Irony

Removing the A.P. Hill monument won't absolve us of our past, but it is a necessary step in redefining the city.

BY CAROL A.O. WOLF

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Scott Elmquist/File

While campaigning in the midst of the pandemic and protests last summer, City Council candidates Anne-Frances Lambert of the 3rd District and Katherine Jordan of the 2nd District fielded complaints about why the A.P. Hill monument was still standing after so many other Confederate monuments were removed.

Various neighborhood civic associations have asked that Hill's monument be relieved of its lonely sentry duty, a post held for the past 129 years in the middle of the intersection at 1600 W. Laburnum Ave. and Hermitage Road.

Each candidate promised that if elected, they would work together to convince council colleagues and city administrators to remove Hill's monument and give his remains a proper burial and final resting place.

It is a perfect example of historical irony that for the last 20 years, Hill's back has been in plain view of the entrance to A. Linwood Holton Elementary School, named after a former Virginia governor who fought to end segregation in the state's public schools.

Since Holton Elementary opened, a steady stream of elected officials has tried to remove the monument from the middle of the road. Prior eviction efforts were stymied by the familiar lament of no money and complicated by the fact that Hill's remains are in the base of the monument. Prior city administrators maintained that moving the monument would be tantamount to desecrating Hill's grave.

Regardless, "it needs to be removed not only for its symbolic meaning but for public safety concerns," Lambert says. "I have been assured by the CAO's office that the monument will be removed, we just don't have a date yet."

Significantly, the monument predates the arrival of automobiles in Richmond and drivers have been complaining about the dangers of this intersection since at least 1966. For the past 20 years, it has consistently been among the top five accident locations in the city, according to the Virginia Department of Transportation.

Research at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture and the Library of Virginia reveals additional historical ironies. Knowing Gen. Ulysses Grant was on his way to Richmond, Hill told family members he had no desire to live to see the collapse of the Confederacy and asked to be buried in Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery or in Culpeper next to his mother and father.

Consequently, when he was shot through the heart near Petersburg on April 2, 1865, just seven days before Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House, Hill's family did its best to honor his wishes.

Because Confederates loathed the idea of allowing the Union Army to capture Richmond and its food, supplies, cotton, tobacco and munitions, they set fire to the city creating a blazing bedlam that ignited lootings and riots.

Consequently, Hill's family had to bury him temporarily in an unmarked grave at Belgrade Plantation, near Huguenot and Robious roads in Chesterfield County.

Two years later, at the behest of Hill's widow, the West Point graduate was disinterred and taken to Hollywood Cemetery where he stayed for 25 years, according to Pickett Society records at the museum.

In 1892, his remains were once again disinterred and moved to the intersection between Laburnum Avenue and Hermitage Road, where they have remained for the past 129 years. His remains are in a stone sarcophagus beneath the monument.

But for the desires of Confederate Maj. Lewis Ginter, then the richest man in Richmond, who wanted a monument for his housing development, Ginter Park, Hill's monument might have landed on Monument Avenue and his remains stayed buried in Hollywood Cemetery.

It is noteworthy that the move from Hollywood Cemetery to the current location was done despite the wishes of some members of Hill's family. One relative, G. Powell Hill, wrote: "I was not favorable to the second disturbance and removal of the General's remains, and I believe such were the feelings of a majority of his surviving relatives, as we believe it was wholly unnecessary."

Here's where more historical irony comes into play. Who could have predicted that 105 years after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, the state would elect A. Linwood Holton as the first Republican governor since Reconstruction?

Or that Holton would declare that he believed integration "was morally right" and his family would choose to send their children to Richmond Public Schools?

Holton walked his daughter, Tayloe, into John F. Kennedy High School while Holton's wife, Jinks, took their middle-school aged children - Anne and Woody - to Mosby Middle School.

Both schools were in the zone for their address at the Governor's Mansion. And both schools were in the heart of housing projects in the city.

By taking this action, Holton and Tayloe walked onto the front-page of the New York Times for simply obeying a court order issued by U.S. District Court Judge Robert R. Merhige Jr. who ruled in 1971 that schools in Richmond, Henrico and Chesterfield should be merged to achieve desegregation in Richmond.

Holton aggravated the old guard of the Old Dominion by publicly supporting Oliver W. Hill Sr. and other NAACP lawyers who helped bring the 1954 landmark Brown v. Board of Education case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Had anyone dared to suggest 50 years ago that Richmond would name a school after Holton, that there would be a federal courthouse named after Merhige and one of Oliver Hill's law partners, Spottswood W. Robinson, that a city courthouse would be named after Oliver Hill, or that President Bill Clinton would present Hill with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, their sanity and sobriety would have been called into question.

No matter how hard anyone tries to erase our shameful past, Richmond will always be the former Capital of the Confederacy and birthplace of Massive Resistance. Like original sin, segregation, Jim Crow laws and institutional racism will remain.

Removing the monument won't absolve us of the past, but it is a necessary first step to help us all know what our city is and what it must become for the sake of our children. S

Carol A.O. Wolf is a former newspaper reporter and former associate Style Weekly editor who served on the Richmond School Board from 2002 to 2008. She writes regularly about the Richmond Public Schools at saveourschools-getrealrichmond.blogspot.com.

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OPINION: Dream Big

If the oldest, continuous lawmaking body in the New World can legalize pot and eliminate the death penalty, then it ought to be able to get these schools fixed.

BY CAROL A.O. WOLF

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Mayor Levar Stoney, School Superintendent Jason Kamras and the various elected officials who routinely suck up to them say they are tired of talking about who will build the new George Wythe High School and when it will be built.

But imagine how tired the public must be of listening to their mumbo-jumbo, blame-game of excuses in response to the protesters' legitimate lament? And how tired are the five School Board members who took back the responsibility of building the schools and now find themselves personally attacked and vilified just for saying no to the mayor and superintendent's wasteful use of money and deplorable delivery of services?

The schools built by the city and its project manager, AECOM, cost Richmond taxpayers at least \$30 million more than the counties would have paid and every building was delivered months late. AECOM got paid more than \$5 million to hand out work to its favored contractors, and the mayor got to look like a wheeler-dealer – leading to \$30,000 in campaign contributions from the city's vendors. Thank God five courageous School Board members finally started doing the math. What else, they asked, could we have done with that \$30 million?

I say to everyone involved: Dream big and expect more from the School Board and the city. Don't be distracted by the shameless showmanship of Stoney, our mayor-on-the-make who has repeatedly demonstrated that the city is his stepping stone. He's a fellow who will do and say just about anything to move his political star up and out of the city limits. Don't forget the lie-laced op-ed Stoney wrote for the New York Times in which he portrayed himself as the hero of last summer's protests. The New York Times and the Richmond Times-Dispatch each had to run articles correcting Stoney's version of events. Said Stoney of his piece, "the article speaks for itself."

So, folks, keep fighting and don't feel sorry for anybody but the students and the taxpayers. Negotiate not just for a new building, but a school with all the bells and whistles with top-notch athletic facilities and landscaped grounds, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, weight room and athletic equipment to rival anything the county schools have. Demand computer resources classes, and certifications so that every child who graduates is headed to college or already has the training to get a job that pays more than minimum wage. Ask for a sound and film studio to support a world-class drama and performing arts school – think Juilliard South.

Stop begging for piecemeal progress on fixing the infrastructure of our dilapidated school buildings. And stop believing in Kamras' cute slogan about a bathroom blitz to fix the toilets in our schools. Pick up the phone and call the plumber. Reach out to every school system in the Commonwealth and invite it to come to Richmond and demand the members of the Virginia General Assembly step up.

If the oldest, continuous lawmaking body in the New World can legalize pot and eliminate the death penalty, then it ought to be able to get these schools fixed.

Demand more than we got for Huguenot High School – an overpriced building built on the cheap and in a rush with a gym floor that sinks and a roof that leaks. School Board members were recently informed that the gymnasium floor in the new River City Middle School is also sinking.

Demand professional pay for the teachers the School Board hires so that they don't have to take second jobs to support their families. Pay them properly to come to school every day instead of calling in when they are tired of having to pay for school supplies out of their own pockets.

And don't just come to a hastily called news conference outside of your school to read talking points prepared by people with ties to the Mayor's Office. Come to City Hall and let folks know that you plan to stay until you get the answers and action needed to create a system that has outstanding schools in every part of the city, regardless of ZIP code, regardless of who the mayor or school superintendent is and regardless of who their BFF – best friend forever – is this week.

If you are truly dedicated to all of our children, then show it and make sure everyone knows it.

Until the General Assembly wises up and give school boards in Virginia the power to raise taxes, let the mayor and the business community know that if they could find the money for the 6th Street Marketplace, the Washington Football Team, the Carpenter Center, the Landmark Theater, Navy Hill and, yes, that damn casino, then they can find the money to fast-track building a school.

And while you're at it, demand that the School Board enforce already existing policy that forbids the superintendent from getting roiled up in city politics. If he is doing his job properly, he should have no time to pal around and be best buddies with the mayor and his cronies.

In case you haven't been paying attention lately, our kids can't read and we have the lowest graduation rate in the Commonwealth.

Carol A.O. Wolf is a former newspaper reporter who served on the Richmond School Board from 2002 to 2008. She writes regularly about the Richmond Public Schools at saveourschools-getrealrichmond.blogspot.com.

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