



STRIP CLUBS AND STRIP SHOPPING CENTERS: POLITICAL MONEY CHASE DEGRADES EVERYONE

For a city better known for Teva sandals than political scandals, the FBI raid on San Diego City Council offices for evidence of bribery and influence peddling from creepy strip club operators was astonishing.

Out of the blue, teams of federal agents swooped into downtown, transforming City Hall into Ruby Ridge. Council Members and staff were held under siege for hours as federal agents hustled out records and electronically vacuumed computers looking for illegal connections to Las Vegas based strip club owners.

The results of the raid and a two year court approved undercover surveillance operation yielded enough evidence to plop five Council Members and dozens of staffers in front of a Grand Jury. Councilmen Michael Zucchet, Ralph Inzunza and Charles Lewis are the focus of the investigation in San Diego along with at least one Las Vegas County Commissioner.

In a town boasting the most stringent campaign finance laws known to humankind, an FBI raid over possible campaign finance abuses and illegal influence peddling from the owners of Cheetah's and Jaguar's, is as illuminating regarding our values as it is about the unintended consequences of our campaign rules.

This City Council, elected in 2000 and 2002 under new term limits rules and old contribution limits, was supposed to be new and improved—less creatures of the smoky back rooms that were said to be inhabited by their predecessors. At least that is what the public thought.

The Mayor rode into office on a white horse trotting down the ethical high road, which hardly explains why the first words out of his mouth in the early hours of the raid were a shock induced “my office is not under investigation.”

This was the Mayor and Council that early on created an Ethics Commission so flushed with self-importance that it asked for a million dollar budget for next year after catching a few former candidates and elected officials with leftover campaign debts and missing this one.

Several of those yanked in front of the Grand Jury had joined the Mayor in proclaiming new days for government in San Diego, free from the corrupting influences of entrenched power interests. This largely meant Developers.

Four Council members took direct and legally disclosed campaign contributions from the owners of Cheetah's, the so-called San Diego “gentleman's club” at the center of the scandal, including women's rights advocate Toni Atkins who is not an investigation target.

In San Diego, strip clubs are apparently more acceptable than strip shopping centers as objects of political influence. Degrading women is not as bad as grading open space.

Some people have tried to draw a moral equivalency between Council Members like Scott Peters who after election solicited buckets of money from developers with projects in their districts, and their colleagues who stood in the hoochie-coochie bread line during their campaigns.

This view is especially keen from communities screwed to the wall with bad projects—and who believed Peters when he berated his opponent during the campaign for allowing these same developers to stuff her garters with checks.

Atkins and Peters simply did what successful San Diegan politicians do—grab as much money in campaign contributions as early as possible to demonstrate what folks in the trade call “viability” and to scare off potential opponents. This has nothing to do with values or beliefs.

Here, politicians are measured by the length of their campaign statements, not by the strength of their convictions.

In San Diego, campaign contributions are limited to \$250 a person per election which means groveling to a lot of people. It also means that a handful of powerful lobbyists for clients who write checks can drive a lot of public policy.

During the last two election cycles, the strip club folks were present at several fundraisers held by their lobbyists. What a sight—some of San Diego's best dressed business people munching stale broccoli heads along side guys right out of Boogey Nights in their half buttoned shirts and gold bracelets.

While the moral equivalency between people who exploit addictions and vulnerabilities for profit and people who build homes is debatable for some, the process of raising money for political campaigns has clearly degraded everyone.