

# **All Money Ain't Good Money**

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For the consumer if a deal is too good to be true, it probably is. For the public official if a deal is too good to be true, it's probably illegal.

I have written this article many times over in my mind, but have been hesitant to put it on paper for fear of running the risk of seeming to point an accusatory finger or wag a self-righteous one. The intent is to do neither. None of us is perfect – least of all me. And believe me, my critics and opponents will be quick to point that out! However, it saddens me deeply to see the increasing number of public leaders across the country and across the political spectrum being stung by stings – duped then dumped – while naively being swept away by the fleeting pleasure of temporary power – self-absorbed in a system they know so well – but not nearly well enough to beat. One of the first lessons we learn in driver education is never try to outrun the train because the train always wins. Perhaps one of the first lessons we should learn as public leaders is never try to outsmart the system, because the system will always win.

We campaign to serve people, not serve time. Moreover, none of us run for office with the goal of being run out of office do we? What happens? Two words – influence and money. Since it is only us chickens here, may we be honest for a moment? For many of us, the office we hold is the biggest thing to happen to us in life. We are invited as special guests to special events where we sit in special seats reserved for special people. We get to rub shoulders with dignitaries and VIPs whom otherwise would not give us the time of day. People recognize us from cable broadcasts of our meetings or

from the news and want to stop and chat when they spot us at the corner grocery or in the gym. We have become virtual celebrities. The icing on the cake is when we have made the A-list of the big ballers and shot callers.

This can be heady stuff. However, as sweet as this can be, what makes it still sweeter for some is the influence that comes with it all – the power to hold sway over people, projects and programs. And like bees to honey, influence always attracts money. But take heed, as we say in my neck of the woods, “all money ain’t good money” – especially for those who oversee the public’s money.

Some would argue that money is neither good nor bad – it just depends upon how it is used. Not so with public officials – it doesn’t depend so much on how we use it, but how we obtain it. And if we use the particularities of our public positions (i.e., influence, access, clout, connections, etc.) to surreptitiously obtain it for personal benefit rather than for the public’s benefit, then *that* money becomes bad money the moment we get it into our greedy little hands. And bad money is always bad news for any public official – no matter how “bad” we think we’ve become.

So, where do you draw the line? How do you know when you’re about to take a kamikaze hit to your career or are being set up in a sting? Well, take a peek at the list below. Away with legalese, I want to keep it simple. Just know that if you are taking any of these, you had better take a look over your shoulder as well, because someone is gaining on you. It will only be a matter of time before you are caught red-handed and red-faced. And two things I have learned about prosecutors – they are extremely patient and they will gladly allow those like you and me enough rope to hang ourselves. Take a look:

- **Play Money** – The private sector is growing increasingly resentful of having to “pay to play” in the government game. If you are charging a price for admission, be careful. The count is 3-2 and it’s the bottom of the ninth. The next pitch could be a strike.
- **Lunch Money** – there is no free lunch. In public office, “free” is rarely free. Wine and dine at your own expense and regardless of what your mother taught you, while in office, always look a gift horse in the mouth.
- **Blood Money** – using the power of your office to profit off the backs of the most vulnerable and least suspecting. Don’t keep what you are supposed to allocate.
- **Milk Money** – you can only milk a cow for so long. Pigs are not the only ones that squeal.
- **Hush Money** – if you have to hide it to keep it quiet, you shouldn’t take it. Hush money eventually will speak volumes.
- **Funny Money** – if it makes you feel “funny” when you take it, give it back. That is your conscience talking to you. Listen to it – otherwise, the last laugh may be on you.
- **Bonus Money** – not reporting the reportable
- **Easy Money** – getting paid to look the other way while others do their dirty work; or worse, having others do *your* dirty work while you rake in the cash.
- **Mad Money** – skimming money off the top because you’ve come to resent a system that doesn’t pay you what you think you deserve or appreciates your perceived value. After all, you give so much and get so little in return. You deserve it, right? Wrong.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, just elemental. These have been the downfall of many and if you have skated by, be thankful. However, if your modus operandi is any of the above, be careful. There will be the eventual knock at your door and it will not be girl scouts selling cookies, but officers serving a warrant.

One of the simple lessons in life I have learned and I believe is apropos here – it is never too late to get right, but get right before it is too late. Don't exchange for chump change, that which you have worked so hard to accomplish – because in the end, that is all to which it will amount. Your integrity is priceless, so is your name. Once you sell them, you can never buy them back – at any price.

No matter if you represent a hundred people or hundreds of thousands of people; as a public official, in the public eye, be assured of two things; someone is always watching and someone will always tell. Take those to the bank, but leave the money where it is.

Never try to outrun the train and never try to outsmart the system. Both will always win.

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