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Can Gianforte's millions buy Montana's Governorship?

A Column by Evan Barrett

October 13, 2016

GOP gubernatorial candidate Greg Gianforte has already put \$3.1 million of his own money into his campaign – including \$550,000 in July, \$640,000 in August and \$1.5 million in September. At that pace and pattern, he could insert another \$2 million this month, which would bring his spending spree to more than \$5 million.

The last time anyone sank anything close to this kind of personal money into a gubernatorial campaign was sixteen years ago when Democrat Mark O'Keefe put \$2.2 million of his money into his unsuccessful campaign against the GOP's Judy Martz. A major part of that defeat was Montanans' rejection of big money.

Last election 483,489 Montanans voted for Governor. Assuming a similar number this year, a \$5 million personal expenditure by Gianforte would represent him spending more than \$10 on each and every voter to persuade the voter that Gianforte is just an everyday Montanan.

Gianforte is not the first multi-millionaire businessman to seek legitimacy by stuffing Montana's ballot box with money. The naked ambition of Montana Copper King W.A. Clark included his attempt to buy legitimacy in five separate tries for a U.S. Senate seat.

Clark's third Senate attempt was the most notorious. During the 1899 Legislature, which elected U.S. Senators at the time, he engaged in the well-documented "over-the-transom" bribery of legislators. Once in the Senate seat, Clark had to resign the day before a vote was scheduled to remove him from office because of the blatant bribery, essentially making him the only Senator in history to be expelled from office.

The 1901 Legislature finally elected Clark to a six-year Senate term, in his fifth attempt; this time successful because, among other things, his Copper King rival Marcus Daly had died. So, Clark's money finally got its way. A well-known historian noted that Clark then "served an undistinguished term that satisfied his political ambitions."

Like Clark and Donald Trump as well, Gianforte seems not satisfied with being a highly successful and very rich businessman, but wants the validation of public office. This comes at a time when income and wealth disparity is a major concern of average Americans and Montanans after decades when nearly all the money and economic gain has gone to the top 1% while the promised "trickle down" has not trickled. The economics of America have been tilted to the advantage of that top 1%. Yet, in the face of that, both Donald Trump and Greg Gianforte propose tax changes that mostly advantage the uber-rich and the large corporations, accompanied by more trickle-down promises.

Gianforte wants his millions of dollars and thousands of 30-second ads to obscure his refusal to answer questions of importance to tens of thousands of Montanans. When asked if he would support or sign any form of so-called “right-to-work” which hurts workers and wages, his non-answer is “it’s not one of my top priorities.” Likewise when asked if he would de-fund Planned Parenthood which provides medical services to over 13,000 Montanans, his non-answer is “I don’t have any plans right now.” These non-answers are code words for “wait until I am Governor and I’ll do what I want.” Gianforte hides behind his money, avoiding important issues while buying commercials by the ton.

Gianforte also tells us we have no business evaluating him based upon his lavish private spending on extreme causes that are questionable at best and often ugly, repugnant and contrary to the tolerant beliefs of most Montanans. He’s spent millions to allow discrimination of Montana citizens, to deny women the ability to make their own reproductive healthcare choices, to advance anti-science causes that re-write human history by placing men and dinosaurs on earth at the same time, and to unconstitutionally channel public monies into religious schools. Those expenditures of his millions may tell us more about the real Greg Gianforte than all that he spends trying to buy and spin his way into the Governorship.

So, count the ads. Small potatoes to him, but it speaks loudly to average Montanans. When Gianforte puts well over \$3 million, maybe even \$5 million, of his own money to position himself to set the destiny of everyday Montanans for years to come, do you think he will represent your interests?

Evan Barrett of Butte, will soon be retiring after 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He currently writes columns and commentaries, is an award-winning producer of Montana history films at Montana Tech/Highlands College and occasionally teaches. These are his personal views.

(700 words in the body)