

Half-time Score: Tax Revolt 10—Political Machine 0

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by James Ostrowski

Early on in the tax revolt, I pointed out that all we had done was stop a proposed tax increase and that much more needed to be done. While we still have not rolled back taxes, I think that several more recent developments are cause for celebration and optimism.

Aside from the important defeat of a \$100 million tax increase, there have been numerous announced retirements or decisions not to run again. The list includes County Executive Joel Giambra, Mayor Anthony Masiello, Comptroller Nancy Naples, and County Legislators Ray Dusza and Steve McCarville. There is also an FBI investigation of certain county legislators that may result in more retirements. One legislator was reported as missing for two weeks, which doesn't bode well for his reelection chances.

Casualties or probable future casualties of the tax revolt include several politicians who have held power continuously for decades including Masiello (since 1972), Giambra (since 1982), and Swanick (since 1980). All those who spent money on their campaigns and traded favors with them over the years have or will lose their special friends. Even if they are replaced by other machine politicians, those replacements are likely to be substantially less in thrall to the special interests and political machines that have dominated politics for decades. These newcomers have gotten the message that the party is over. They will play nice with newly-elected independents, at least for a while.

Proving once again that free market competition works, the local media has descended upon county government with a frenzy never seen before and their aggressive reporting has revealed it to be incompetent, dishonest and corrupt. This image will be remembered for many years, just as many baby boomers such as this writer continue to view government through the lens of the twin disasters of their teenage years: Watergate and Vietnam.

The tax revolt is being made permanent. A tax revolt "triumvirate" has emerged. Speakupwny.com has become the largest political site in Western New York. Primary Challenge is up and running several impressive new candidates, and Free Buffalo, the new people's think tank, expects to open an office in June in Buffalo and begin churning out policy studies and research. It will hold perhaps the largest tax revolt gathering yet on May 28th at the Central Terminal. A fitting location as the Terminal symbolizes the glory days of Buffalo that we intend to revive.

The tax revolt is extending beyond Erie County with much activity throughout Western New York and Upstate New York. And it is going to extend into that heretofore ignored branch of government: the judiciary. Most political fights end up in court these days, so plans are being formulated to bring the spirit of the tax revolt to the bench. Otherwise, hard-won victories could be overturned by elitist judges installed by yesteryear's political power brokers.

Unlike the government, the tax revolt is not a monopoly with some boss in charge with the final say. Rather, it is a spontaneously-organized voluntary movement of like-minded citizens each contributing according to their particular talents and preferences. As with any market-based endeavor, the principles of entrepreneurship, specialization and the division of labor have guided these developments. Naturally, the founders of all three groups are self-employed entrepreneurs. Nuts and bolts political mechanics drift toward Primary Challenge, computers whizzes gravitate toward Speakupwny.com and policy wonks and taxpayer activists find their way to Free Buffalo meetings. There is of course great overlap among all these groups as well. Their relationships are more symbiotic than competitive. They each increase the size of the tax revolt and thereby create a larger market for their unique services and programs.

To ask--Do we really need all these separate groups?--is akin to asking about an airplane: do we really need the wings, the engine and the fuel? On the contrary, I believe that as long as we face a political machine that controls \$18 billion a year in spending and has tens of thousands of troops and allies, we need all the help we can get. I would welcome even more groups which can fill a valuable niche in the tax revolt. Let's not make the mistake that political movements have made throughout history and start fighting each other. These short-term ego battles and turf wars were often followed by long-term defeat! What general in his right mind, whose troops are outnumbered and fighting desperately, would turn away new volunteers?

The tax revolt, which began in December, is healthy and growing. It is going to permanently change the nature of politics in Western New York and will very soon noticeably improve the quality of our lives. It has already made our wallets heavier and spirits lighter.

As Aristotle said, "Well begun is half done."