

National, state politicians ignore us at their peril



BY LANCE
DICKIE

Seattle Times
editorial columnist

NOTHING kills a romance faster than taking affection for granted. The admonition holds true in politics, too.

Republicans nationally and Democrats locally may find their, um, relationship with voters on the skids.

Consider the sorry performance of the GOP this past year in Congress. The party was in full control of the House, Senate and the White House, and it accomplished just about zip.

At the most elemental level of competence, Republicans could not finish work for the federal budget year that began last October. Seven of 13 annual spending bills will have to be shoved into a \$378 billion omnibus package, shorthand for "we couldn't get the job done."

Returning from the Thanksgiving holiday, Congress still has to cover 11 departments that do the basic work of the federal government. Any notion of scrutiny, oversight or fiscal integrity is replaced by desperate expediency.

Republicans wooed their way back into favor with voters by talking endlessly about being good stewards of the public treasury. Balanced budgets, and all that. They'd watch every nickel and get good value out of a lean government run like a business.

Their business model was either Tyco, WorldCom or Enron.

Politics runs in cycles. Democrats were in power forever, until it was painfully obvious they were out of ideas and credibility. At what should be the top of their game, Republicans look overwhelmed and beholden to forces more intimidating than

the taxpayers back home. Consider the numbers.

The federal deficit for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1 is expected to be \$500 billion, up from \$375 billion last year. Where is the fiscal discipline ballyhooed as a hallmark of the party? There isn't any.

Certainly, there is an expensive war on, but the conservative Heritage Foundation estimates 55 percent of the new spending since 2001 has no link to national security. "The Republican Party has grown addicted to federal spending as a means to re-election," said a foundation budget analyst.

Well, it worked for those randy Democrats, but sober Republicans pledged to be different.

Voters will notice. They will notice the failed energy bill stunk to high heaven, because it was a finely crafted raid on the national treasury — heavy on subsidies and light on actual policy.

Same with the prescription-drug benefit tacked onto Medicare. Why does a presumably good thing have to be so difficult to understand? The benefit is delayed, the expense buried in future budgets.

It's a chintzy benefit at a high cost whose impact on the federal deficit is camouflaged past the next election cycle. Everyone is supposed to forget, but voters should notice and remember.

Here at home, Washington state Republicans have finally decided they'd rather win statewide than keep shoving ideologies off the electoral cliff.

Names are popping up that have heft and have been tested by public service. I am looking for candidates willing to embrace ideas and reshape them to fit the times, something beyond the coached response of every GOP legislative candidate with nothing else to say: "I support performance audits."

My model might be former Oregon Gov. Victor Atiyeh. Conservative as a

dark-blue suit, he was elected twice in the midst of the state's timber depression of the 1980s. He'd had a long legislative career, seen a lot of change and been against most of it.

Atiyeh's strength, which I admit was not totally apparent to me at the time, was the ability to work with public policy he was not crazy about and use it effectively.

An apostle of small government, Republican Atiyeh was willing to spend big dollars on economic development to jumpstart a recumbent economy. He was no fan of statewide land-use planning, but he recognized that the certainty it provided companies was a compelling recruiting tool.

Atiyeh was no bleeding heart, but his tough-guy treatment of the state budget allowed him to hold welfare programs harmless in a time of deep cuts. He also nurtured higher education's potential to help power the state's economy.

Do any of the Democrats or Republicans with statewide ambitions have the stuff to lead against the party grain for the greater good?

Voters notice, whether it's fumbling in Congress or sandbagging in Olympia.

A classic example was Initiative 695, the rollback of car tabs.

Lawmakers had a dirty secret and stayed mum. They knew the car-tab formula inflated revenues, because the tax was based on the sticker price, not the sales price as popularly understood. Subsequent assessments were artificially high, too. Once aware of the scam, enraged voters were unequivocal.

Remember that as the Medicare plan rolls out and the rip-off energy plan resurfaces. Voters notice when their affections are taken for granted.

Lance Dickie's column appears regularly on editorial pages of *The Times*. His e-mail address is ldickie@seattletimes.com

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