

# Drain the Swamp

by Bill Herbst

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I read a news article recently — don't remember where — stating that in the 2016 Presidential campaign Donald Trump's handlers advised him to add a talking point to his rallies. That talking point was "Drain the Swamp," meaning getting rid of the rampant corruption in Washington D.C. among the permanent political class. According to the article, Trump had never heard the phrase before and didn't know what it meant. And why would he? Donald Trump had spent an entire lifetime frolicking in the swamp, rolling in the muck. Damn near everyone he knew was a swamp creature. He thought the entire world was a swamp, where self-interest and compulsive desire to acquire material wealth (in any way, and at any cost to others) were not only "normal" but, presumably, "good." (That's a basic tenet of right-wing philosophy, that greed is good.) Trump's campaign advisers assured The Donald that his base of supporters would respond enthusiastically to Drain the Swamp rhetoric, and they did. So, Trump built in the notion to his snake-oil sales pitch.

He added a caveat, however. On numerous occasions, Trump told his supporters that, while he had nothing against those who were poor (hah!), he would appoint "only the best people" to his administration, and that meant the very rich. His "argument" was that people who were already wealthy wouldn't be vulnerable to the lure of bribery or other ill-gotten gain, since they weren't driven by the need for more money. His adoring fans let Trump get away with that nonsense, but nothing could have been further from the truth.

The fact is that human desire is insatiable. If one's primary lust is for material wealth, no amount is ever enough. The case can be made that prodigious wealth tends to inspire ever greater drive for more. Look at the Koch brothers. That's not to suggest that everyone who acquires wealth — either modest or immense — continues to pursue it headlong. Warren Buffet works at making more money because he enjoys the process of investing. For him, work is play. Bill Gates is now more concerned with distributing his massive wealth in projects that support the greater good than he is with acquiring more (although I'm sure that the financial wizards who manage Gates' fortune are working overtime to insure that the pile grows ever larger). No, the truism that desire is insatiable is only a general guideline, not an all-encompassing law.

Two individuals from Trumpland stand out in the tragicomedy of the current news cycle. One is Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign manager, now on trial in federal court. The other is Wilbur Ross, Trump's Secretary of Commerce. (Many more could be included, from Scott Pruitt through Michael Cohen, but the two noted above are sufficient for my purposes.)

Manafort appears to be about as craven as it gets, with his over-the-top, lavish lifestyle of uber-expensive clothes, cars, and homes, while Ross has been labeled by Forbes Magazine as the ultimate American grifter and con man. Both qualify as swamp creatures — lifelong denizens of the cesspool of money-grubbing.

If we didn't have an American culture based on greed that presents self-aggrandizement, endless marketing, and unlimited emphasis on making money as peachy keen and perfectly acceptable, would individuals such as Manafort and Ross still exist? Probably. These are "young souls" with no inner self-worth, for whom the only validation of their value as human beings is their bank accounts. Money is what matters to them, for they have no intangible resources of value. Even if our culture discouraged them from greed, they would probably still be inclined to lean in that direction anyway, for it's the most socially affirmed way to fill the empty void inside themselves.

Or maybe I'm not giving these corrupted men enough credit. Perhaps if the culture were less materialistic and placed more emphasis on the "inner development" of personal goodness and less on the acquisition of monetary wealth, they would have turned out differently. I don't know. What I will assert with relative certainty, however, is that the numbers of people in America who are similar to Manafort and Ross in their greed-driven compulsions (even if in less extreme forms) are much higher because of the culture's tacit approval.

If one doesn't possess a clear inward sense of values, then society provides the missing elements. Group norms give permission. Friends and associates become models for motivation and behavior. In the pejorative sense, the old phrase, "*Lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas,*" is all too true. A person is defined both socially, in terms of reputation and respect, and also psychologically, in terms of personal self-identity, by the company he or she keeps. The clubs in which we apply for and receive membership (or are rejected) exert an outsized influence in many of our lives.

Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting that material wealth through the pursuit and acquisition of money is an inherently bad thing. Nope. Whether such ambitions are positive or negative depends on the person and the context. I've seen ample evidence in the system I use professionally (astrology) that a percentage of human beings are here to work on that achievement. Earning money is meaningful in their life-journeys, sometimes even as the central theme. So please don't conclude that I'm part of the money-is-evil camp. I don't believe that we should all leave the marketplace, head for the monastery, and take vows

of renunciation and asceticism. For some people, that might be attractive and work well. For most, it would fail miserably to provide fulfillment.

The problem with Paul Manafort and Wilbur Ross is not that they like money and seek it. The problem is that pursuit of wealth has corrupted their psyches. They seem to love and value nothing else. They're willing to lie, cheat, and steal to get more money — endlessly more. They can never have enough.

The old phrase, "*There's a little larceny in all of us*" may not be true for every human who ever drew breath, but to me it seems accurate enough to pass muster. To one degree or another, we all have feet of clay. We're vulnerable to the allure of material gain (as well as the social approval and privileged lifestyles that come with wealth), however those carrots are dangled in front of our ego-donkeys. Many people start out in business or public service motivated by noble ideals or the wish to make a meaningful contribution. If they become corrupted, that occurs slowly, over time, abetted perhaps by the frustrations of long deprivation or repeated failures, but just as often (and probably more frequently) by the seductions of success. Other people (a much smaller percentage, or so I imagine) are not motivated by ideals of service, but are corrupt from the get-go.

As far as I can tell, Manafort and Ross were always in business for what they could get out of it. They intentionally gravitated toward the dark worlds of Big Money and Big Corruption. I don't pretend to know the content of their private, inner self-awareness. My guess is that neither man has much, if any, sense of conscience and probably no remorse at all. My judgment from afar is that they are irredeemable scoundrels, like too many of the people in Trump's orbit.

While the permanent political class in America is certainly guilty these days of using public service as a vehicle for personal enrichment, the ascendancy of Donald Trump and his gang of thieves sets a new, all-time low for venality, fraud, graft, malfeasance, and corruption. That may be sparking a revolt from the grass roots as people of integrity decide to run for elected office. In the ebb and flow of such shifts, I hope we are reaching the point where the voting public recognizes the importance of honesty and virtue as necessary qualities of the people we choose to represent us, whether in the local school board, their state capitol, or Washington, D.C.

I don't anticipate that many of the current class of con artists and grifters now holding office or appointed positions will be prosecuted and jailed (Manafort might be a notable exception, although I fear that even he will somehow wriggle off the hook), but I fervently want all of them — the whole stinking lot — to be sent packing and out of the government.