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Leibell: A Morality Play

The hard fall of Vincent Leibell from the pinnacle of power only amplifies what everyone has known for years: New York's political system is fatally clogged with the fetid stink of corruption.

It's so laughably bad that reform seems like a mild prescription.

What's really needed is a colonic, a thorough cleansing to flush out all the cynical, greed-driven crud that is sucking the life out of the state. We don't have political parties anymore. Instead we have rackets, owned and operated by an incestuous gaggle of bosses, lobbyists, fixers and, perhaps worst of all, vainglorious incumbents who have been in office so long that they can't see the difference between right and wrong.

Leibell served in the state Legislature for 28 years, first as an assemblyman and then as a senator in the 40th District, a gerrymandered creation that includes bits of Westchester and Dutchess counties and all of Putnam. Think of this setup as a tri-county shell game: Pick which one is hiding the senator and win a patronage job.

A popular figure who brought home prodigious amounts of pork (In one month alone a few years back, he delivered \$1.6 million to local projects) Leibell always won big at election time. He was an MVP of the Republican caucus, a heavy hitter who frequently led the Albany league in office expenses and taxpayer-funded mail.

Buildings are named after guys like Vinnie Leibell.

In November, Leibell decided to run for Putnam County executive. It was a nasty race his opponent, Mary Ellen Odell, compared him to Boss Tweed.

Over the years, other opponents questioned Leibell's integrity. Mike Kaplowitz, who ran against him four years ago, accused him of "running a members-item Ponzi scheme" that involved funneling state money through the Putnam Community Foundation, a nonprofit agency Leibell established in 1999.

Leibell beat Kaplowitz anyway. And he won against Odell, too, with 61 percent of the vote.

But this week, Leibell's political career crashed. A source told The Journal News that Leibell told him he was in "big trouble" and that he was going to cop a plea to unspecified corruption charges on Monday. He quit the Senate early and won't be sworn in as Putnam's county executive in January.

It's been speculated that this has something to do with the FBI subpoenaing records

related to the construction of Leibell's \$1.6 million home, a three-story mansion that from the front looks like a one-dimensional movie set. Investigators also sought records involving legal services provided the town of Carmel by the politically connected law firm, Servino, Santangelo & Randazzo.

Here's where things get interesting. It's time to play connect the dots, starting with a character by the name of Anthony Mangone.

Mangone is an attorney who once worked for the aforementioned law firm. A Zelig of the region's seedy political underworld, he always seems to turn up when there's an odor of corruption. For years he worked for Nick Spano when Spano, like Leibell, was one of the most powerful members of the state Senate. Eight years ago, Mangone testified in an election fraud trial that he opened absentee ballots and wrote in the names of Spano and a GOP judicial candidate for the Green Party ballot line. He agreed to plead guilty but was never charged.

Mangone knows things that some people might not want out in public.

That's why it's important to note that only a few days before the Leibell story broke, he pleaded guilty to charges in a separate federal corruption case involving allegations he paid bribe money to former Yonkers City Councilwoman Sandy Annabi.

See, it's nervous time when a dirty-work specialist goes down. Especially when the feds are involved. The local politicos fear them because they are from outside the system. Has Mangone made any deals?

Here's another dot to connect. Also this week, the Westchester County Conservative Party ousted its chairwoman, Gail Burns.

Like Mangone, Burns was a loyal toady on the Nick Spano Senate payroll. She did Spano's bidding.

One of the things she did was steer the Conservative Party endorsement to Andy Spano (no relation to Nick), a dyed-in-the-wool liberal Democrat who ran for re-election against Republican Rob Astorino in 2009. A lifelong Republican who became a lobbyist after leaving office, Nick was placing bets Andy would win a fourth term as Westchester county executive and pulled strings accordingly.

In the end, Astorino won without the coveted Conservative line. Nevertheless, rank-in-file Conservatives were outraged and filed a lawsuit against Burns that they eventually lost. But guess who served as Burns's lawyer? Yep, Mangone.

And now Burns is out and Mangone is facing a prison sentence. This has been a very

bad week for Nick Spano.

Incidentally, the new Conservative chairman is a fellow by the name of Hugh Fox Jr., who it just so happens also works as a \$92,470-a-year labor specialist in the Astorino administration. Ah, revenge is sweet.

But are you holding your nose? That now makes four party operatives on the public payroll.

The others are Democratic boss Reginald Lafayette and Republican boss Douglas Colety, who are commissioners on the Westchester County Board of Elections, and Independence Party Chairman Giulio Cavallo, who works as a "community liaison" for the state Senate in Albany.

Throw in this week's conclusion of testimony in the shameful and utterly creepy domestic abuse trial of White Plains Mayor Adam Bradley, (a friend of Hugh Fox's, by the way) and you begin to think it's time to do something really desperate like move to New Jersey.

Leibell's fall is the latest plop in the cesspool.

And it's sad. Whatever he did or didn't do, there's a morality play in it because a long time ago, before he went to Albany, he was a Westchester County assistant D.A.

Schooled in right and wrong, Leibell was undoubtedly idealistic and committed to catching crooks. He must've been good at it, too.

He was assigned to the rackets bureau. Of all things.

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