

August 1st, 2008

Endow This Column Today, for Only a Pittance

By Leonard Fein

At Brandeis University, the standard advice given to visitors is that they must not stop as they walk about the campus — for in less than a minute, a plaque is attached to any immobile object. Nor is Brandeis unique in its offer of “naming opportunities.” Atop one synagogue in Newton, Mass., there is an air-conditioning unit that has been plaqued in honor of its donor; in hospitals across the land, corridors and elevators and, for all I know, even bathrooms — though not yet, I don’t think, individual urinals — have been appropriately marked.

All this gives rise to the “Leonard Fein Plan for Deficit Reduction” (no plaque required).

You are doubtless aware that the federal government operates at a massive deficit. Many worthy programs have been underfunded for years, others have been dropped. We pay huge sums each year just to cover the interest payments on the loans we have taken to cover earlier deficits. The size of the deficit for 2008 is now projected at \$410 billion; the cumulative debt, as of the day I write this, is \$8,511,811,750,580.34. That’s almost \$9 trillion, or \$31,250.92 for every American.

The candidates promise to balance the federal budget and pay down the debt. That is, in a word, blah-blah. It will not happen, not even when the war in Iraq is over.

The Treasury Department has a somewhat different proposal. Its Web site features the following Q&A: “How do you make a contribution to reduce the debt? Make your check payable to the Bureau of the Public Debt, and in the memo section, notate that it is a gift to reduce the debt held by the public. Mail your check to: Attn Dept G, Bureau Of the Public Debt, P. O. Box 2188, Parkersburg, WV 26106-2188.”

I do not know how many people are employed to open the consequent mail in Parkersburg, but I would be surprised to learn that more than one is needed, and that one only a part-timer.

Can nothing be done?

Aha! Let us learn from Brandeis: Let there be a mega-expansion of naming opportunities, starting with our common property — to wit, the buildings of the federal government.

Some of those buildings virtually shout for commercial endorsement. After all, in baseball we already have U.S. Cellular Field (Chicago White Sox), Tropicana Field (Tampa Bay Devil Rays) and Comerica Park (Detroit Tigers).

Why not the Viagra Washington Monument, the Home Depot Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Slim Fast Rotunda?

Those are among the most obvious kinds of naming opportunities, but they barely scratch the surface. Have you noticed, for example, that the individual seats in concert halls now often carry a sponsor's name? This suggests that sponsorship need not be restricted to the vastly wealthy, that even the merely affluent can experience the thrill.

For a relative pittance, the seats of senators and representatives could easily be plaqued, and for, say, 10 times the price tag on those seats, each of the nine justices of the Supreme Court could be similarly endorsed. (To ensure judicial independence, no endower should be permitted to select a particular justice's chair. It would not be pretty, to put it mildly, were Anthony Scalia to sit in the Rush Limbaugh Chair.)

And if chairs, why not also those who sit thereon? It happens at universities all the time, as I have good reason to remember. Once, in an earlier incarnation, I was appointed to the Phillip Klutznick Family Professor of Cotemporary Jewish Studies Chair at Brandeis. I wrote to Phil Klutznick at the time, proposing that we dispense with the middle man: Why could I not be just the Phillip Klutznick Family Leonard Fein?

Why a chair? Why Brandeis? Why all that overhead? (My suggestion was not viewed with favor.)

Middle-man or not, what's wrong with endowing officers of our government, so long as the endowers understand that their contribution does not entitle them to privileged access? Or

even, if you think that “The Bill and Melinda Gates Nancy Pelosi” is a bit much, name just the specific offices they hold, as in “The George Soros Majority Leader of the Senate.”

The idea of such sponsorship is surely more dignified than, say, vanity license plates, of which there are more than 9 million in America today; it would surely produce very much higher revenue, both because of its greater popularity (here we’re talking heavy-duty vanity) and the much higher fees associated with each transaction.

There are even ways to render the opportunity more accessible, available to masses of people: Girl Scout Troop #17 (Oshkosh) might use its cookie profits to perpetuitize itself by naming the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services — or, if it’s feeling especially frisky, an FBI agent. There is even the possibility of adding real mystery to the process, as would happen were Mr. and Mrs. Ploni Almoni to underwrite a CIA operative, whose name would of course not be revealed.

I know, I know, there are problems to be solved. People convicted of felonies, perhaps also of gross misdemeanors, would not be eligible underwriters. Foreign governments, perhaps even all foreigners, would have to be restricted; the Ibn Saud Lincoln Memorial is too jarring a juxtaposition. (But what’s wrong with the King Abdullah National Botanical Garden?)

The president and vice president should most likely serve their terms in office unadorned. (Although the Bush/Clinton President of the United States has a certain *je ne sais qua*.)

And then there’s the issue of overhead: Are we talking just about a cosmetic fix, a plaque that is evidence of good citizenship but does not endow operations, or do we intend a serious endowment, indicating true patriotism?

We have the resources. It’s only a matter of political will.