

FORMER ATLANTA MAYOR BILL CAMPBELL GETS WHAT HE DESERVES: JAIL TIME

Let me go straight to the bottom line. I don't like former Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell. I found him to be a racist of the worst ilk, arrogant (trust me -- I know something about arrogance, being the modest and much-beloved columnist that I am), mean-spirited, intemperate and a bully. And those are his better sides. In his federal corruption trial, he was also revealed to be a gambler who always showed up with large wads of unexplained cash, an adulterer, and, according to federal judge Richard Story, guilty of taking bribes and obstructing justice.

Campbell is finally going to reap some of the bad seeds he has sown. After a federal corruption probe that resulted in the conviction of 10 former city officials and contractors, the ex-mayor and full-time pit bull was found guilty on three charges of federal tax evasion and sentenced to two-and-a-half years in federal prison. As of this writing, Campbell hasn't yet shown up at the pokey because he is (a) appealing a decision that he should be thankful was less severe than it could or should have been, or (b) awaiting a visit from the Crocodile Hunter who is going to attempt to defang him — whichever comes first.

American humorist Will Rogers once said, "I never met a man I didn't like." He never met Bill Campbell. Mayor Bill is to nice what hobnail boots are to ballet dancing. Besides, Campbell would have taken Rogers' comments the way he took everything else, as a racist insult. He would have insisted that Rogers hire a minority vendor — most likely a friend of the mayor's — to hold his lasso, and if he didn't, would accuse him of being part of a massive racial conspiracy.

Had I been the judge, I would have given him more time than he could fathom for screwing up the City of Atlanta before, during and after the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games. To Campbell, the Olympic Games were nothing but a big ol' Freaknik, except there were a few too many white people running around to suit his taste. The city, thanks to Campbell and his cronies, blew a great opportunity to present itself to a watching world as a modern, sophisticated city. The ill-fated sidewalk vendors program, which snarled the city's streets during the Games, looked like a tacky Third World flea market on steroids. The program lost money for most everyone involved except Campbell's buddy, Munson Steed, who conceived the disaster.

For good measure, I would toss a few playmates in Campbell's cell, including several members of the Atlanta media who spent more time trying to catch Atlanta Olympics CEO Billy Payne in a misstatement than in putting an inept city government on notice that it had better get its blow-hard act together before the world came to visit. I would also add some of the spineless business boosters who saw what was happening to the city but were afraid to confront the mayor, lest they be labeled racists.

Playing the race card was a Campbell specialty. When the Feds first began looking into some of the mayor's shenanigans, he said he was the subject of a "racial inquisition" and compared the FBI to the "KGB in Communist Russia." He failed to mention that the investigation began under the Clinton Administration and Attorney General Janet Reno, and that the head of Atlanta's FBI office and the U.S. Attorney for northern Georgia were both black. In 1999 the Southeastern Legal Foundation, a conservative public-interest law firm, took the City of Atlanta to court for its joke of a minority vendors program. Campbell said he would fight the lawsuit "to the death," that the Foundation was like the Ku Klux Klan and urged his supporters to picket the homes of the members of the Foundation until they chickened out. Last I looked, the SLF is still around, the mayor is alive and sulking, and his minority vendors program is deader than a doornail.

I could go on, but you get the idea. Bill Campbell is going to jail. Shed no tears for him. It is long overdue. Good riddance to a bad apple.