

Political fund-raisers: Dinner for two . . . thousand

By JEREMY GAUNT
Congressional Quarterly

WASHINGTON — Dinner-table campaigning is yielding some appetizing morsels for political candidates these days.

While there has been much emphasis in recent years on the role in campaigns of direct-mail fund-raising wizards such as Richard Viguerie, or media consultants such as David Garth and Robert Squier, the venerable fund-raising dinner is still alive and well.

In fact, some dinners are raising as much money in one night as many candidates raised during entire campaigns a few years ago.

Consider the following:

- An April 29 fund-raiser in Houston for Republican Sen. John Tower of Texas grossed \$1.5 million. It was the largest amount ever raised at a single event for a Senate candidate. (Tower since has announced he will retire.)

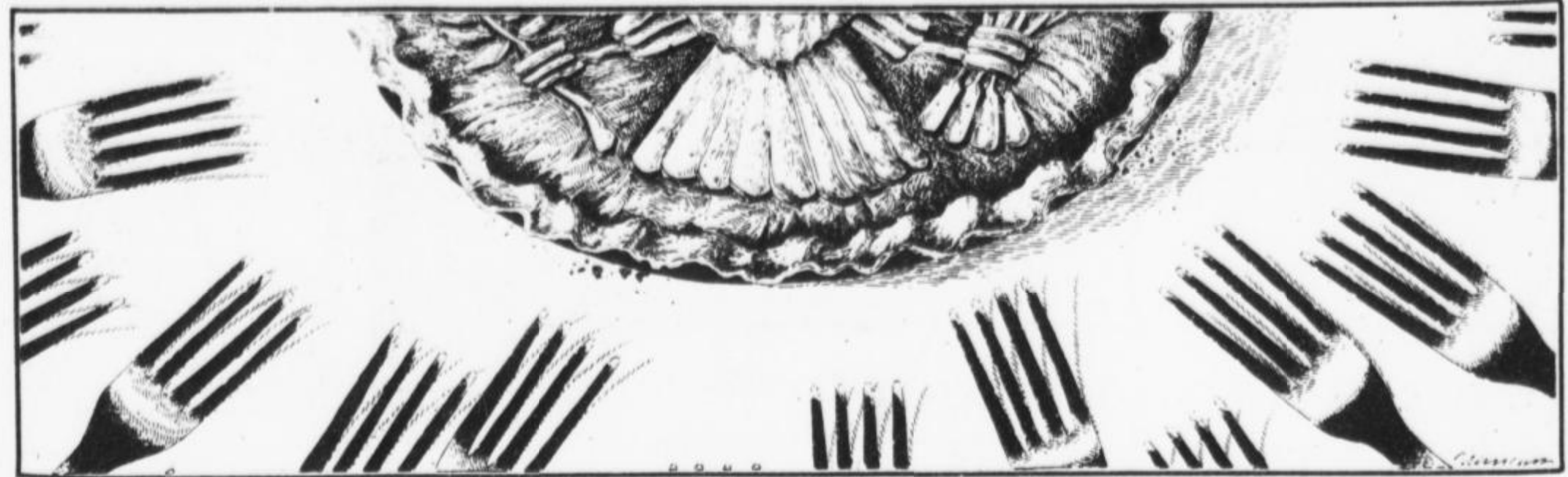
- The second largest "take" at a fund-raising event was \$1.1 million — raised for GOP Sen. Charles H. Percy of Illinois on Jan. 19 in Chicago. The previous record was \$1 million raised Jan. 14, 1982, at a Dallas salute honoring Tower's 20-year Senate career.

- A September fund-raiser at the Columbia (S.C.) Fair Grounds for Republican Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina grossed \$430,000. A modest sum by national standards, it nonetheless is the largest amount raised at a single event in the Southeast. Previously, the highest amount raised by a GOP candidate in South Carolina was \$70,000.

All these events were organized by political consultant Brad O'Leary, president of PM Consulting. O'Leary is a Republican fund-raiser whose technical approach to managing campaign events matches anything served up by direct-mailers, pollsters or media experts.

"People who do a dinner right will find the dinner brings in a lot more money," O'Leary says. And doing it right means planning it six to nine months in advance, he says.

O'Leary's events are not stuffy — he likes to make them fun. A fund-raiser for ex-astronaut and former Sen. Harrison "Jack" Schmitt, R-N.M., featured actors Buster Crabbe and Gil Gerard, both of whom played spaceman Buck Rogers in the movies, and the actors who portrayed Scotty and Lt. Uhuru in television's "Star Trek." The master-of-ceremonies was an actor who specialized in



impersonating President Carter.

An O'Leary fund-raiser a few years ago — again for Tower — erupted when a shotgun-toting John Wayne rode a stagecoach drawn by four horses around the auditorium where the dinner was held.

Politicians, of course, are the main draw. President Reagan and 11 senators attended the record-breaking Tower event. Reagan and nine Senate committee chairmen attended the Percy dinner.

O'Leary tries to involve as many people as possible in the dinners. He aims to have 150 to 300 co-chairmen for his dinners. Co-chairmen "sell" tables for a price they think they can handle. Donations for the Percy dinner, for example, were \$1,000, \$400 and \$200. Thurmond dinner prices were \$500, \$200 and \$100. Between 2,800 and 3,000 people attended Tower's Houston fund-raiser; 2,200 attended Percy's.

The more money a contributor pays, the closer he or she is to the main table. O'Leary also scatters VIPs — celebrities and politicians — among the crowd to make donors feel they are getting something for their money.

O'Leary sees an advantage to dinner fund raising. It

attracts what he calls "fresh money" to a campaign. Dividing tables among so many co-chairmen brings in new donors. Making events enjoyable also attracts more money from past contributions.

The special event can also serve as a way of keeping large contributors happy. In September, O'Leary helped the National Republican Senatorial Committee entertain its Inner Circle of contributors — those who give \$5,000 a year to the committee.

Some 1,300 contributors visited Washington for a briefing from senior politicians and government officials. They went to a reception at Vice-President Bush's home and then split up to attend one of about 65 separate dinners that O'Leary termed "intimate."

Some dinners were held at the homes of senators and Cabinet officers. (One ended with contributors getting a private, late-night tour of the Capitol from Sen. Thurmond.)

Special fund-raising events can be much more cost-efficient than direct mail. Practitioners estimate that the cost of hosting large events eats up about a third of the money raised, while a proven, successful direct-mail list

can cost one-half to two-thirds of the money it brings in. An untried list (one in which the fund-raiser "prospects" for contributors) may only break even, or may lose money.

Successful dinners are not just the prerogative of Republicans. The Democrats, too, have learned that a well-fed audience can fill campaign coffers.

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), the fund-raising vehicle for Senate Democrats, did just that Oct. 25 at the Washington Hilton. A dinner tribute to Democratic Sen. Russell B. Long of Louisiana grossed nearly \$1 million from about 900 people paying \$1,000 (some sent checks but did not attend). Long would be chairman of the Senate Finance Committee in 1985 if the Democrats recapture the Senate — the DSCC's goal for 1984.

Among the co-chairmen for the Long dinner were the chief executive officers of General Motors, Chrysler and AT&T. VIPs included former Sen. and Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie, D-Maine, and former Sen. Richard S. Schweiker, R-Pa., President Reagan's first secretary of health and human services, now a life insurance executive.