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ADVICE FOR 1988 CANDIDATES

To borrow the words of a popular song, it's a long, long time from now till November 1988, but I am giving my advice now to all those who will then be candidates for any national office. It's not too early to begin positioning yourself on the major issues.

If you run a sophisticated modern campaign, you will probably hire an expensive pollster to tell you what are the issues the voters will care about in 1988, and what position you should take to appeal to the majority. That's largely a waste of your valuable campaign funds, because most pollsters don't understand the difference between the way people answer poll questions and the issues that motivate them to vote.

So, right now, I'm going to save you some valuable campaign money by cluing you in on the one issue that can make or break any Presidential, Senatorial or Congressional candidate in the November 1988 election 22 months from now: pay raises for government employees.

The Commission on Executive, Legislative and Judicial Salaries recommends that members of the Cabinet be raised from $88,800 to $160,000 a year (80%), members of Congress from $77,400 to $135,000 (74%), federal appellate court judges from $85,700 to $135,000 (58%), and federal district court judges from $81,100 to $130,000 (60%). Similar raises would benefit a total of about 3,000 top federal employees.

Several years ago, Congressmen discovered the peril of voting pay raises for themselves. So they rigged up the subterfuge that a Commission will recommend the salary increases which, if approved by the executive branch, will take effect unless Congress passes a joint resolution rejecting the raises.

In other words, Congressmen get an automatic pay raise unless they vote NOT to raise their salaries. What a racket!

Do these federal officials deserve a pay raise? That's a dumb question. None of us is paid what we "deserve." We are paid a compromise between what we think we deserve and what an employer is willing to pay us.

The employer of all federal officials including Congressmen is the American electorate, and most people don't believe that federal officials and Congressmen deserve a pay

raise. If the Congressmen connive to get one anyway, the voters will fire their employees at the next election.

What are the arguments for these up-to-80 percent pay raises? The Commission cites inflation, but that argument is as phony as a $3 bill. Inflation is lower than at any time since 1964, and Congressmen are paid just as much today as they were in 1964 if their salaries are adjusted for inflation over that 22-year period. This doesn't even count their valuable perks and pensions.

The pay-raise advocates say we must pay federal salaries comparable to those of executives running large corporations so we can "retain good people." Whom do they think they are kidding? Plenty of qualified and capable Americans are glad to take government positions at current salary levels so that, after several years, they can move into the private sector at double or triple the government salary. Their government service gives them experience and contacts that pay off very well after they move into the private sector.

To justify the pay increase for judges, the Commission said we have had an increase in resignations of federal judges for financial reasons. The commission said, "lifetime tenure [of federal judges] becomes a sentence in itself, a sentence that more and more judges are unwilling to serve." This extravagant rhetoric was brought about by the resignations of 15 judges in the last four years -- that's right, just 15.

The resignation of 15 federal judges out of several hundred is hardly cause for alarm. Maybe it's even a good thing; many people believe that a higher turnover among the life-tenured federal judges would improve the judiciary.

But, really, the arguments pro and con are beside the point and will not be determinative. The political facts of life are that those Congressmen who vote to allow the pay raises to take place will be defeated in 1988. Just ask the hundreds of state legislators over the past decade who voted themselves a pay raise and then suffered the wrath of the voters.

In one of his last acts as Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill wrote President Reagan and urged him to approve the proposed pay hike. In his entire career, O'Neill has never passed up an opportunity to attack President Reagan in the most bitterly partisan manner. Like Brer Rabbit saying, "Please don't throw me into the Brier Patch," O'Neill is adept at advising his principal adversary to do exactly the opposite of what he should do.

Republicans will lose if they allow themselves to be led down the primrose path by Tip O'Neill and the other pay-raise advocates. In November 1988, the liberals will even join in the fingerpointing against those who took their advice.