

Remarks for Civic Education Conference
February 9, 2009
Cantigny
Wheaton, Illinois

- Thanks to Carolyn Pereira and Shawn Healy
- Focus groups in 1990 during the Edgar campaign
 - Had been reporting on state government and politics for nearly 40 years
- Didn't feel any better when I began teaching public affairs reporting at SIU in 1998
- Lack of knowledge has real consequences
 - Lack of participation
 - Uninformed voters ... heavily reliant on 30-second commercials that distort and mislead
 - Many Illinoisans feel ill-equipped and powerless to hold public officials accountable ... and too many of them are ill-equipped thanks to:
 - Inadequate civic education when they were in school
 - Media paying less attention to government and politics and focusing on horse race and strategy instead of on the issues
 - Potential voters not meeting their responsibilities to become informed and being swayed by TV ads
- Illinois is now facing a budget crisis of unimaginable dimensions
 - New governor and legislative leaders face excruciatingly difficult decisions on spending and revenues
 - Their task is not helped by a lack of public understanding ... much of it aided and abetted by pandering politicians who have feared asking people to sacrifice

- Institute poll
 - Taken when the deficit was at \$2b ... but I'm not convinced the results would have been any different
 - Substantial majority said we can cut our way out
 - Also opposed reductions in education ... human services ... public pension programs ... law enforcement ... environmental protection ... and state parks
 - They took more than 90 percent of the budget off of the table
 - Where would they cut? Lower pay of state officials ... ground the governor's air plane
 - Could eliminate spending for the entire legislature and take the governor's plane away and that would get us 3 percent closer to closing the gap between spending and revenues
 - Clearly the people of our state have no grasp of either scope or scale when it comes to our state deficit.
- How can Illinois citizens play a role in shaping major budget decisions? How can they hold officials accountable?
 - They are still hearing anti-tax rhetoric
 - When Cullerton and Madigan raised the possibility of a tax increase ... the state Republican chairman jumped on it ... saying we don't need tax increases
 - Okay ... where would they cut?
 - Education?
 - Health care?
 - Shutter prisons and turn dangerous people loose?
- Should look for places to cut ... but let's get real
- And how will the media report on this?
 - Good understandable knowledge of options or the usual emphasis
 - He says/she says without independent, forthright analysis

- Horse race ... who is winning and losing
 - Strategy ... the politics of trying to put together the budget
 - Personality ... is the new governor getting along with the leaders ... are the leaders getting along with each other
- What about the education of the people?
- The media have a major responsibility ... so do we ... as educators and citizens
- Must start early
 - A fundamental understanding of American government is essential
 - Must be done in a way that is exciting ... relevant ... and exciting
 - They don't want to be talked to
 - They are accustomed to being entertained and interactive
 - Don't need to dumb down civic education ... need to ramp it up
- Requiring civic courses would be great ... but difficult to justify additional mandates ... especially without funding
 - Seek innovative ways of working it into existing courses
 - Involve teachers ... technology wizards ... kids and others in designing approaches
 - After-school programs
 - Scouting programs
 - Extra-curricular activities
- Institute
 - Youth Government Day ... interacting with state officials and those in the government arena ... a few years ago ... a young state senator named Obama
 - Barat Foundation
 - Creative techniques for engaging and educating young people

- Working with the foundation to link its efforts with a leadership program involving young African-American males from the East St. Louis area
- Many of you have exciting efforts under way
 - Marc Kiehna ... regional superintendent of schools oversees a program that has resulted in young people designing legislation that actually has become state law
- Can pass ethics laws to improve government performance ... but the ultimate reform is greater civic engagement
- We need to make sure the people of Illinois understand the opportunities and the obligations of citizenship
- Need to do remedial work with grownups ... but the real key is informing and energizing kids
- Won't get the headlines that major legislation will command ... but it will make a bigger difference
- Thank you for your role in this