

# Mandel's memories blur past for new generation

They say time heals. It also blurs. You look back, but after a while, sometimes it is easier to forget than to remember.

In India, people are expected to live with the consequences of their karma not just for one lifetime, but for several, at least.

Here, where the average attention span is barely long enough to take in a 60-second commercial, our collective memory seems to last for a couple of years at most. After that, each new mini-generation is left to rediscover the universe on its own.

So anyone who hangs around long enough can usually manage to outlive his past, no matter how sordid or corrupt.

Our instinct — a good and decent one — is almost always to forgive.

Look at Richard Nixon and the Watergate criminals. Or, even closer to home, look at Spiro Agnew — if you can bear it.

Most of those guys have long since cashed in on their memoirs and moved on to bigger and more lucrative deals.

And no one seems to care much any more about what laws they did, or didn't break, or how much they did, or didn't stuff their pockets with public money.

So it should not come as much of a surprise to hear that 3½ years after his release from federal prison, former Maryland Governor Marvin Mandel, a disbarred lawyer, was the Young Democrats' guest speaker at the University of Maryland Law School the other day.

And it should not come as much of a surprise to hear that, despite the notable absence of administration or faculty representatives, the students greeted Mandel warmly, enthusiastically and respectfully — certainly more like an ex-governor than an ex-con.

"I don't know much about the Mandel case," one third-year student said after the former governor's talk. "I was just a kid at the time."

But for those who remembered even the barest outline of the corruption charges that were leveled against Mandel, the former governor's account of the case against him seemed to blur a few important distinctions.

Mandel compared the deal that got him into trouble with the banking deal Governor Harry Hughes worked out with Citicorp this year.

In the Citicorp deal, Hughes agreed to push for legislation that would allow an out-of-state bank to offer full-service banking in Maryland if the bank agreed to invest \$25 million in the state and hire at least 1,000 people here.

In the deal Mandel was accused of orchestrating in 1971, the ex-governor was said to have manipulated legislation that allowed his friends to make millions in a secret race-track investment. In exchange, Mandel was accused of having received more than \$300,000 worth of shares in the deal, a \$150,000 loan to finance his divorce, and close to \$1 million in campaign contributions the friends raised on his behalf.

Obviously, one big difference between the Hughes deal and the Mandel deal is that Mandel pocketed the proceeds of his deal, while the benefit of the Hughes deal, as far as we know, goes to the state.

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Nevertheless, Mandel told the law students, "When I was in office, if I would have done what Hughes just did with Citicorp, it would be a crime or a bribe. Today, it's economic development."

He dismissed the entire case against him as "a political situation."

"I got into a disagreement with Jimmy Carter," Mandel said. "He lost the primary in Maryland and he blamed it on me, and we ended up with a federal mail fraud indictment."

Mandel was convicted in August, 1977, on federal mail fraud and racketeering charges that stemmed from the race-track allegations. He entered a federal prison at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida in May, 1980, and was released in December of the following year.

Since then, he says he has been working as a real estate and financial consultant, and hosting a daily radio talk show in Annapolis. The other day, he looked fit and relaxed, as if being a guest speaker were still the most natural thing in the world for him.

He talked about power, and how a strong governor can use his power. He told, for example, how he once traded an important judicial appointment for a vote he needed to pass the legislation that created the Baltimore subway. He agreed to appoint the nominee a key legislator wanted as judge. In exchange, the legislator agreed to vote for the subway.

Mandel defended that kind of horse-trading, without apologies.

And when he talked about the race-track deal that was his undoing, you had the impression that in his mind, it was just another horse trade.

It was as if he didn't recognize the distinction between a trade for the good of the state and a trade for the good of Marvin and friends.

"As time goes on, I think more and more people are looking at the whole case and wondering what it was all about," Mandel said, at one point. "There was no bribery. There was no extortion. The only charge was not telling the public about friends with an interest in a race track. If that's a crime, then you could all end up being indicted for something."

As I said, time heals. Time blurs. And sometimes it is easier, certainly kinder, to forget than to remember.