

Get Off Easy

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Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell was handed a relatively light two-and-a-half-year sentence this spring in federal court on tax evasion charges. But don't make the mistake of thinking he got off easy because he wasn't convicted on the accompanying corruption charges, retired FBI agent Oliver Halle of east Cobb said this week.

"I can assure you he didn't 'get off easy even though he wasn't convicted on the racketeering charges,'" he said. "First of all, there's no parole in the federal prison system, so he'll do all of those two-and-half years. But make no mistake. The consequences of a felony conviction can be absolutely devastating."

Convicted felons can't teach school, can't hold professional licenses, can't hold a job that entails any sort of fiduciary responsibility, and suffer social ostracism as well, Halle said. Campbell also stands to be disbarred.

"Even though Bill Campbell is prominent and I'm sure there will be some people willing to help him out, he will never enjoy the status he had before in the work environment," Halle said.

Halle was the agent who opened the case against the mayor, and it all stemmed from a conversation in September 1999 with a man named Bert Timmerman, who had just pled guilty to price fixing. He requested a meeting with the FBI, and told Halle he had purchased a wastewater equipment company from Jack Greenlees of Cobb County when Greenlees was headed to prison after being convicted after the FBI's investigation into corruption in the Cobb Water Department in the late 1980s.

Timmerman said while trying to sell water equipment to the Atlanta Water Department for a multi-million dollar project, he was approached by an associate of Campbell who said, "If you give me \$600,000, I'll guarantee you get the contract because I'll pass it on to the mayor," Halle recalled.

"So I went back to the office and opened the case," Halle said. He spent four years working it, and it didn't go to trial until three years after his retirement.

"Timmerman represents a perfect example of external pressures that can cause good people to do really stupid and bad things," Halle explained.

Timmerman's business sold mainly to municipalities.

"If you know your competition is swimming in a sewer and that they pay to play, then what are you going to do if you want to survive?" he asked.

That's when it's time to take the harder right, Halle said.

"Taking the Harder Right" also is the title of his new book, which takes its title from the Cadet Prayer at West Point. Its point is that taking the harder right is wiser than taking

the easier wrong.

"Taking the Harder Right" is also the title of the ethics-training programs that Halle now conducts around the country at corporations and colleges as a second career.

"It's not easy to take the harder right when you're faced with a difficult decision," he said. "What do you do if you're in Timmerman's shoes? Do you pay? Do you report it to the police? There can be enormous negative consequences if you take the easy way out, but the consequences of taking the harder right can be catastrophic, too. But in my opinion, taking the harder right beats taking the easier wrong."

Halle saw plenty of easy wrongs during his 28 years with the agency, the last 17 of them in Atlanta working white-collar crime and corruption cases. He started out in New York City investigating the Mafia and was later named to the New York City Police Department Honor Legion for his role in the FBI/NYPD investigation and prosecution of the hierarchy of the Columbo crime family. He's been on "60 Minutes" with Ed Bradley, "The FBI Untold Stories" and "Women in the Mafia" TV shows, all in connection with his work on the Columbos. And he was profiled in the book "Mob Girl" by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Theresa Carpenter. No, the book was not about Halle, but about one of the mob moll sources he developed.

Halle has law degrees from the University of North Carolina and the New York University School of Law, as well an undergraduate degree from Elon University in North Carolina.

A native of Brooklyn, he served with distinction in the Navy during the Vietnam War, in which he commanded a Swift Boat and earned a Bronze Star medal for valor.

In an interesting touch, his wife is an FBI agent as well. The couple has three children. He's been busy this spring and summer serving as the unofficial campaign manager for Post 6 Cobb school board candidate the Rev. Dr. John Crooks.

We'll close today by repeating his advice: "Choosing the easier wrong instead of the harder right can be the biggest mistake you ever made in your life."

Keep that in mind.

Associate editor Bill Kinney's column also runs on Tuesdays and Saturdays.