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Dustin McDaniel goes to war

BY PAT LYNCH

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LITTLE ROCK — It seems that many of the folks around here who should be

protecting and nurturing the regular working folks are, instead, dutifully attending to the needs of the super-rich and corporate elites, so when Attorney General Dustin McDaniel recently came up with a way to possibly get a relatively small tax increase through the Legislature without the required three-fourths' majority vote, I hit the roof.

Several intelligent and respectable individuals suggested that I might have been a little hard on McDaniel and that one little harmless opinion does not represent an unrestrained freefall into the clutches of corporate tyrants. This thought was already growing when McDaniel declared war on payday lenders. I am now persuaded that my previous critique was misplaced and an unfortunate visceral overreaction to what was, at most, a venial sin.

Anyway, Dustin, here's your stinkin' arrow, and in the future I will try not to let my gut do things for which the brain is designed.

Payday lending is the kind of issue that ought to make people focus on the importance of state and local elections. Everybody wants to know my opinion of the presidential race, and that is a somewhat mystifying development for more than one reason. On one hand, it is gratifying to have been settled in one place long enough to be both icon and guru. On the other, it makes a guy look even more ridiculous on the rare occasions one of us local

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wizards messes up.

Of the three presumed leading candidates, each enjoys a special knack for sugarcoating, clouding, obscuring and dancing around tough, specific questions. Each is possessed of the innate ability to instinctively discern which precise incantations will appease the base while not too deeply offending the center. These mystical formulas are written in pencil. Try as we may to figure out who might be best for the country, circumstances, history and necessity push them to do what seems quite different from what they were promising.

The issue of high-interest loans exacted upon unwary poor folks reveals a lot more of the human soul than easily clouded and distant national issues. Unscrupulous and well-moneyed corporate interests are beating real people right down the block to economic death. Any public official willing to put up with that kind of thing, such as Sen. Bob Johnson and the entire state Senate "brotherhood," deserves extra scrutiny.

McDaniel sent a letter to members of Arkansas' payday lending industry demanding that they "cease and desist" from making or collecting usurious loans. The response from that bunch of scoundrels was so fuzzy, foggy and flimsy, one would have thought there might be a presidential candidate lurking somewhere within. Their argument, which stretches logic past the breaking point, is that their particular breed of lender operates within the Arkansas Check-Cashers Act of 1999. Case closed. Never mind the state Constitution's interest rate cap, and please don't bring up the Arkansas Deceptive Trade Practices Act, one of the grounds under which attorney general is proceeding. (All the while, we are called on to ignore the inconvenient fact that these green professional exploiters are free to operate unhindered so long as they keep the interest rate to a budget-bust but nonetheless legal 17 percent.)

Payday lenders are swift to observe the many supposed contributions they make to the less fortunate. Considering how many foreclosures and bankruptcies have supposedly been averted through the tender mercy of these upstanding citizens, it is a wonder Mother Teresa never got into this racket. After all, what could possibly be wrong with charging an interest rate of 370 percent and maybe a lot more?

The very suggestion that this practice is somehow beneficial is morally repulsive and a bit insulting. The reprehensible snakes that do this kind of thing want to put the blame off on the consumer. If they had been smarter, wiser, prettier or better planners and harder workers, they would not have needed this kindly beneficence. Those who have been blessed with one or two moderately good breaks easily forget what it might be like for a flat tire, an extra prescription or a daughter in urgent need of a prom dress to show up just when you're dead broke.

Some people who are young and inexperienced fall prey to the scam. Just look around military bases to prove that point. While it may not be the government's job to save us from every social evil, any society that would put up with this kind of business conduct might as well legalize murder.

What McDaniel is doing is one of the most important things happening in Arkansas. It matters, and he needs support. Payday lenders will not go meekly away to earn an honest living. They will be back as soon as the lights go out.

This fight will go on for years and the attorney general needs and deserves our support.

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Free-lance columnist Pat Lynch has been a radio broadcaster in Central Arkansas for more than 20 years.

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