

SNG-Culture of corruption casts shadow

“The Chicago Way” casts shadow on mayor’s race

By Jim Nowlan

A culture of corruption known as “The Chicago Way” has cast a shadow over at least four of the leading candidates in a field of 14 vying to occupy that city’s top job.

As I have written in this space, I think the job of Chicago mayor is arguably more important than that of Illinois governor. The three-state metropolis of 11 million gathered around Chicago is one of the world’s great megacity regions. Much of Illinois is heavily dependent upon Chicago. For example, the future of Peoria and its local Caterpillar employees are heavily affected at CAT headquarters, now located in the megacity.

I define the Chicago Way of corruption as unearned personal gain at public expense. The Chicago Way came to the fore recently when the U.S. Department of Justice complained that powerful Chicago alderman Ed Burke attempted to extort property tax appeal business for his law firm. He allegedly did this by offering to help a fast food business get its necessary permits from the city, which indeed he had been holding up.

For maybe a century, leading Cook County (Chicago) Democratic politicians have operated a scam:

The elected assessor, always a Democrat, jacks up property valuations on big properties.

“Property tax lawyers” (nearly all top Democrat officeholders and party officials) then appeal the assessments in behalf of their property owner-clients. The lawyers often win big reductions in tax assessments for their clients, and thus in their tax bills. The connected lawyers take, of

course, a nice slice of the money “saved.” I call this legal corruption, as it is not against the law, though it should be.

Burke and Illinois House Speaker Mike Madigan, also in office exactly half a century, each operate property tax law practices in Chicago.

Burke is innocent till proven guilty, of course. Yet, it must be other than reassuring to Burke that historically 95 percent or more of all federal indictments for public corruption in the U.S., as well as in the fed’s Chicago district, result in convictions.

This federal complaint came at the worst of all possible times for three leading mayoral candidates. Cook County Board president Toni Preckwinkle, Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza and former Chicago School Board president Gery Chico all have close ties to Burke. So, they have become fair game for guilt by association.

A fourth leading candidate has also been drawn into the ethics discussion ignited by the Burke complaint. Bill Daley is the son of legendary Chicago mayor “Boss” Richard J. Daley. Chicago newspapers are now recalling that son Bill was unsuccessful years ago at passing a state insurance license exam. But he apparently won his license on a second try as a result of having someone in the state insurance office fill in some of the answers—it’s the Chicago Way, you know.

So, what are the consequences for candidates with Chicago Way connections? Maybe little. After all, it can be argued that the three with Burke ties almost had to work with him in order to make their way up in Chicago politics. And why should Daley be faulted today for what happened 35 years ago?

I talked mayoral politics last week with a young political junkie friend, who is deep into the city's Democratic ward politics. She thinks the brouhaha over corruption may cause some voters to turn away from the four who are being bruised by the Burke/corruption issue. They might shift from these better-known aspirants to clean-as-a-whistle candidates like former federal prosecutor Lori Lightfoot and my former student Paul Vallas, a one-time, nationally known schools reformer.

If no candidate receives 50 percent of the vote Feb. 26 (and none will), the top two vote getters square off April 2. Since most of the 14 candidates have their respective voter bases, polls show that any of up to eight candidates could end up among the top two, even if no one receives more than 15 percent of the vote.

Early voting has already started, yet my political junkie friend thinks such will be low—because many voters, including herself, are still undecided. For example, does my friend vote for her favorite, who may not end up among the top two at the Feb. 26 scrum, or vote to help ensure that her second choice makes it. Friend thinks this kind of strategic voting could deprive an unattractive candidate, or worse, two unattractive types, from taking the top spots in the runoff.

Oh, the Chicago Way of politics, always fascinating, but in need of exorcism.