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Corruption habit hard to break

By Jim Nowlan

Corruption has been an enduring habit in Illinois and Chicago governments throughout our history. And habits are hard to break.

During the 1890s, for example, street car magnate Charles T. Yerkes paid bribes of up to \$50,000 each to Chicago aldermen in return for particularly favorable franchises. Yerkes simply bought most of the 68 members of the city council. He set market prices for council favors: \$100 for a saloon license, \$500 to restore a license that had been revoked for cause. The \$200-a-year job of alderman became worth \$25,000, often more, to the boodlers (grafters).

In the first decade of the 20th Century, supporters of Congressman William J. Lorimer created a national sensation when they apparently paid \$100,000 in bribes to as many as 40 state lawmakers in Springfield to elect Lorimer to the United States Senate.

Bribes of up to \$2,500 per bribed lawmaker were doled out by Chicago representative Robert “Bathroom Bob” Wilson, notorious for handing over bribes in his hotel bathroom. (At the time, a new Model T Ford cost \$850.) In 1912, Lorimer was expelled from the United States Senate on the grounds that he would not have been elected absent the bribery.

By the time Al Capone hit town a few years later, one alderman declared, “Chicago is unique. It is the only completely corrupt city in America.” In such an environment and with much of the citizenry thirsty for the beer and spirits prohibited by the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, “a Capone became not just logical but inevitable.” During the Capone Era, Chicago Police Chief Fitzsmorris himself admitted that about half his force of 6,000 was involved in bootlegging—not just as solicitors and recipients of bribes, but actively pushing booze.

As Kenneth Alsop observed, writing of Chicago: “But, after the start of Prohibition, who was the crook? Millions of people who regarded themselves as upright, law-respecting. . . .began. . . .to cheat and lie, and entered into routine conspiracy with the underworld.” As Capone once put it: “Nobody’s on the legit. . . .Your brother or your father gets in a jam. What do you do? Do you sit back and let him go over the road, without trying to help him? You’d be a yellow dog if you did. Nobody’s legit when it comes down to cases.”

Corruption is difficult to quantify; it takes place in the interstices of society’s web. One measure lies in actual convictions for “public corruption,” compiled by the public integrity section of the U.S. Department of Justice. From 1996-2005, the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Northern District of Illinois (the Chicago region) logged 453 convictions, more than the 371 in New Jersey and 219 in Eastern Louisiana, areas often linked with Illinois for having the most corruption in the country.

Indeed, four of the past seven Illinois governors (Otto Kerner, Dan Walker, George Ryan, Rod Blagojevich) have been indicted or convicted of wrongdoing by

federal courts. The Blagojevich indictment for trying, among other things, to sell a U.S. Senate seat will be tried later this year.

Illinois residents are against corruption, at least in the abstract. In the 2007 Illinois Policy Survey conducted by Northern Illinois University, 90 percent of respondents said that corruption is a somewhat serious or very serious problem in Illinois government. Yet how do citizens behave when faced with their own governmental problems?

At the beginning of each course in American politics I teach at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I conduct an exercise with my students, generally seniors and headed for law school.

In summary, the exercise asks students what advice they would give their older brother who has been charged with a DUI. Older brother must have a car for this first job out of college and would lose his license if convicted of the charge; he has a desperate need for his job. A wily lawyer has told older brother that he knows his way around the court system and can get the charge dismissed, but it will take \$1,000—in cash—in addition to his regular fee. Should older brother reject the offer or go for it?

I have conducted the exercise with about 30 students in each of seven courses. Two-thirds of all these students say: Go for it! In one class, 19 of 23 students said go for it. The primary reasons given for the student responses: the brother was in a desperate situation and, anyway, everyone else who can goes for it.

The culture of corruption in Illinois will not be changed easily. Old habits are hard to break.

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