

What's to dislike about Illinois?

By Jim Nowlan

Illinois has an image problem. While most Americans have a mostly favorable view of most states, they have a decidedly unfavorable view of Illinois. A recent survey by a respected firm found that only 19 percent of Americans had a favorable view of Illinois, the lowest percentage for any state in the nation. What can we do to improve our image?

Late last year, Public Policy Polling asked the question: "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of (name of state)?" Fifty-four percent saw Hawaii favorably and only 10 percent unfavorably. Other states with strong favorable ratings were Colorado, Tennessee, South Dakota, Virginia, Montana and Alaska.

Only five states had more unfavorable than favorable ratings—California (27 percent favorable; 44 percent unfavorable), New Jersey, Mississippi, Utah, and Illinois. While only 19 percent had favorable views of the Prairie State, 29 percent had unfavorable perspectives. This means that 52 percent were "not sure" about their view of Illinois. This high percent not sure was typical of responses for other states, with an exception for larger-than-life Texas (41 percent favorable; 31 percent unfavorable; and only 29 percent unsure).

Why is Illinois one of the least liked states in the nation?

With the exception of having had the good fortune to travel much of the world, I have lived my life all around Illinois. I have resided Downstate rural and city (Toulon,

Springfield, Urbana, Galesburg) as well as in the suburbs (Glencoe) and Chicago. I have found all to be favorable places.

Downstate has pleasant small towns that I idealize as places of “dear hearts and gentle people.” The people are nice, though maybe not quite so nice as Iowans, who are relentlessly, almost insufferably nice.

There is also the bountiful agriculture. Then we have Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, nurtured to greatness in Downstate Illinois.

I think of Downstate Illinois as like most all of Indiana and Iowa, both of which received strong favorable reviews from those surveyed (Indiana, 31 percent favorable and 12 unfavorable; Iowa, 42 percent favorable and 17 unfavorable).

As a place to live, Chicago is an exciting city, with a vibrant city center and great cultural gems like the Chicago Symphony and the Art Institute.

But maybe Chicago is our problem. To this day, when traveling overseas, mention of Chicago often brings arms up from foreigners, as if holding a machine gun, to reflect the Al Capone era. I thought maybe the Michael Jordan image would supplant the gangster image but Jordan has left us. Strong imprints like gangsterism apparently fade very slowly.

And of course maybe our unfavorables were affected by the Blagojevich debacle, which was concluding in the national media about the time the surveys were done.

Perception of corruption in Illinois is strong. For another project, I had a national survey taken of perceptions of corruption in all of the states. Illinois was named “as one of the most corrupt states” third most often among the 50 states, after only New York and

California; one-third of all respondents nationally considered Illinois among the most corrupt. Neighboring states like Iowa and Indiana were rarely mentioned.

So we have a less than stellar image. Is there anything we can do about it?

In a column for the Chicago Tribune several years ago, before I started writing here, I proposed that we change our state name from Illinois to the State of Lincoln. After all, people worldwide know Lincoln, and of course favorably, yet they have little awareness of Illinois. They do know Chicago, and not so favorably. I was serious, but readers generally couldn't see their way to such a big change.

Chicago has a new, no nonsense mayor in Rahm Emanuel. He alone can't turn matters around, yet he can make a start. Chicago mayors are better known than our state's governors, because Chicago is better known.

Chicago is slowly becoming known for its striking skyline, captivating architecture and cultural assets, yet these favorables will take years, probably decades, to change perceptions.

I still think the State of Lincoln makes sense.