

Mostly Good and Competent Men

By Jim Nowlan

In the wake of the Blagojevich years, a reader asked me if Illinois had in its history had any really good governors. The answer is yes, the state has benefited from its share of principled, effective, even courageous governors. Let me describe all too briefly some I consider among the best.

The well-born Edward Coles (who governed from 1822-1826) had served as President James Madison's private secretary. Coles freed the slaves he had inherited and encouraged Thomas Jefferson to do the same, unsuccessfully.

Pro-slavery forces dominated the new frontier state. They passed a resolution in the legislature for a referendum to call a constitutional convention at which they planned to legalize slavery. Lacking the veto power, Gov. Coles rallied opponents and led a brilliant campaign to defeat the call for a convention, which would have created turmoil and slowed the development and migration to the state by Easterners.

Unlike Coles, Thomas Ford (1842-46) came from poverty, working as a farm laborer and servant in a country tavern. With the support of an admiring, successful lawyer, young Ford rose to the state supreme court.

As governor, Ford believed the state had to make good on huge debts run up by earlier legislatures to finance an impossibly grandiose scheme of canals, railroads and highways, most of which were never built. Default would have been the easy way out,

but it would have chilled the investments by Easterners and Europeans necessary to develop the state.

Under Ford's leadership, the legislature adopted a property tax levy to begin to pay off the staggering debt load. Ultimately the bond holders were paid in full and Illinois blossomed with imported capital.

The German-born son of peasants, John Peter Altgeld (1893-1897) became a liberal Chicago Democrat who as governor expanded the University of Illinois into graduate, medicine and science fields, opened state colleges at DeKalb and Charleston and appointed Florence Kelley to rigidly enforce factory inspections.

Altgeld is best known for his political courage in pardoning the Haymarket Riot anarchists whom he felt had been railroaded into prison for murders they didn't commit. The public became enraged by his action, effectively ending Altgeld's political career.

And in an era when bribery was common, Altgeld, near bankruptcy himself, refused a bribe of somewhere between a half million to a million dollars to sign a bill to extend street car leases in Chicago, which he vetoed.

Frank Lowden (1917-1921), a farm boy turned millionaire Chicago lawyer, modernized state government in the interests of economy and efficiency. He convinced the legislature to abolish scores of boards and commissions, which often provided patronage job havens, and consolidated state government into nine code agencies.

Lowden probably forfeited the presidency because of his unwillingness to play ball with the corrupt Chicago faction of his Republican Party. At the 1920 nominating convention, the anti-Lowden faction of Illinois delegates withheld their votes from the

state's "favorite son." This lack of support from his home state is seen as a key reason the convention ultimately turned away from Lowden and to Warren G. Harding.

Henry Horner (1933-1940) saw Illinois through the Depression and broke with the Chicago Democratic political machine that opposed his successful re-election in 1936.

Horner convinced the legislature to enact a new sales tax to replace an inadequate state property tax, which allowed the state to pay its share of unemployment and relief costs.

One of my favorite governors was Richard B. Ogilvie (1969-1973), for whom I have a bias, as I was his runningmate in an unsuccessful bid for a second term in 1972.

A no-nonsense World War II tank commander, Ogilvie loved executive management. In order, he modernized and gave professional leadership to the Cook County Sheriff's office, the Cook County Board and the governorship.

As the state's chief executive, the progressive Republican created a state budget bureau and one of the first environmental protection agencies. Ogilvie is best known for enacting, with Democratic support, the Illinois income tax.

We were narrowly defeated in 1972. Ogilvie blamed not the new tax but instead a ban on leaf burning by his EPA prior to the fall election, which really ticked off downstaters.

If you would like to read more about all Illinois governors, check out from your library "Mostly Good and Competent Men" by Robert Howard.

Of the governors I have noted above, it may not be coincidental that most served just one term, and in difficult times. Courage has its costs.