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Nowlan riles readers with Rauner piece

By Jim Nowlan

Several readers sharply disagreed with my recent column that took Gov. Bruce Rauner to task for his budget strategy, even criticism from a savvy, insider Chicago Democrat who said I was too tough on the governor.

I have apparently failed to differentiate for readers between Rauner's objectives, which I support, and his strategy, which I believe has failed. I subscribe to the old Will Rogers adage: "If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging."

I wish now I could have taken back that column before I sent it out, because I committed a cardinal sin of opinion writing: I didn't propose an alternative strategy, which I offer herewith.

Let me stipulate that Illinois House Speaker Mike Madigan has been in that role way too long and must go.

Indeed, Madigan may suffer of the dastardly faults Rauner has leveled at him, though he is not quite alone the antichrist.

Over his tenure as speaker there have also been three Republican governors. It was also Republican legislative leaders who in the 1990s, when in power relatively briefly, changed the rules that gave Madigan, who simply continued those rules, many of his near-dictatorial powers.

Speaking of sins, Madigan's biggest has been to ossify the democratic process in Illinois. Through his control he alone can block absolutely any legislator's bill, even amendment, from ever being heard in the House.

So he should go. Yet holding the budget hostage, which is of apparently no interest to Madigan, won't make him go away.

Part of the governor's strategy has been to pull liberal Democratic House members away from Speaker Mike Madigan. The premise has been that the speaker's unwillingness to compromise on a budget solution would cause intolerable harm to many of their often-poor constituents.

Rauner has not been successful in that as of yet, but he has accomplished one thing:

The governor has scared the bejesus out of many Democrat House members, who fear being tarred in the next election by Rauner and his money for associating with Madigan.

[I ran the traps of my savvy insider lobbyist friends, those who have been creating political strategies for their clients for years. I wanted to see what they would propose for Rauner to get him and us out of our present damaging budget impasse.

[But they had little to offer. They have never, in decades of observing, seen the kind of incredibly bitter, mano-a-mano stand-off between political leaders we have at present.]

So, I have come up with my own two-track strategy for the governor:

First, propose a balanced budget, with necessary tax increases, that will stabilize the state's fiscal situation over the coming years.

Rauner should of course blame Madigan, whom the governor has successfully vilified among the voting public, for the tax increases, based on Madigan's 30-plus years of profligate misrule.

Second, propose "The Rauner Turnaround Manifesto" (or some such moniker) in which Rauner creates a voting scorecard for each Dem lawmaker.

The scorecards would be a high-powered version of the old “Friends of Labor” and “Friends of the Farm Bureau” scorecards, which were influential in their day but are now probably irrelevant, as plutocratic big money has made parties and interest groups much less important.

Rauner and company would update the scorecard *within* each lawmaker's district regularly—Rauner has shown he has the money to do this—as to how the lawmaker voted on each issue, to wit:

- voted for Madigan as speaker, yet again;
- voted for the House Rules that give Madigan dictatorial powers and block important legislation;
- voted against term limits;
- voted against meaningful redistricting reform;
- voted against workers compensation reforms;
- voted against tort reform;
- voted against property tax freeze.

Madigan would of course use parliamentary tricks to try to obfuscate such issues.

Yet Rauner’s forces in the House could seek to discharge their reform bills from the House speaker’s Rules Committee, efforts the Dems would oppose—at their re-election peril. This would give Rauner the capacity to use his limitless money to blacken his opponents widely in their districts.

This might either cause some Democratic House members to break with Rauner or, if they failed to come around, to weaken them so much they could be beaten in the 2018 elections.