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Rauner breaks mold of Illinois governorship

By Jim Nowlan

*This is the second in a series about “politics and policymaking in Illinois.”*

In his biography of Illinois governors titled “Mostly Good and Competent Men,” the late Chicago Tribune reporter Bob Howard concluded that the 40 to hold the office thus far have been, with a few notable exceptions, okay but not remarkable, certainly no visionaries among them.

Are there lessons to be learned by Illinois GOP governor Bruce Rauner, who has struggled in his battles with Democratic House Speaker Mike Madigan, from those who have gone before? Maybe; maybe not.

Several past governors stand out.

A penurious lawyer on the frontier, Democrat Thomas Ford (1842-46) restored fiscal integrity to the state, important for prospective outside investors.

Ford insisted that Illinois tax itself to pay in full a huge debt that had been run up earlier by the likes of lawmakers Lincoln and Douglas to pay for “internal improvements” (canals, plank roads and railroads) that mostly died aborning.

Republican Frank Lowden (1917-1921) received national notice for reorganizing a state government comprising scores of tiny bureaus into but a handful of state agencies.

Lowden might well have become president in 1920 but for lack of support from a corrupt Chicago faction within his own party. At a convention deadlocked between Lowden and General

Leonard Wood, the delegates, unimpressed by Lowden's inability to command his own state delegation, finally went for Warren Gamaliel Harding.

Democrat Henry Horner (1933-1940) saw the state through the Depression, replacing a faltering state property tax with a new sales tax, in order to generate funds for relief for the many destitute.

In 1936, the Chicago Democrat Machine led by Mayor Ed Kelly and party boss Pat Nash dumped Horner from their slate because of his independence from them and for passing the two cent sales tax.

The ensuing no-holds-barred election battle made the current political war between Gov. Rauner and Speaker Mike Madigan seem like child's play.

At a time when Ku Klux Klansmen were parading at the state fair in white robes and cone hats on state militia horses, Jewish Chicagoan Horner nevertheless swept every downstate county to win party re-nomination, and then re-election.

William Stratton (1953-1961) and Richard Ogilvie (1969-73) were highly productive Rockefeller-style Republican governors (that is, spenders and builders).

Both raised taxes. They also modernized state government. Stratton pushed through a model judicial reform and redistricted the legislature years before the U.S. Supreme Court demanded it.

Ogilvie added to Stratton's revamped highways and tollways, created an environmental protection agency before the feds did so, and established a professional budget bureau.

And significantly, both collaborated with Chicago Democratic Mayor Richard J. Daley to gain passage of their initiatives.

While Democratic governors and their party leaders have squabbled, Illinois Republican governors have generally controlled their own party. In my master's thesis a half-century ago, I pointed out that under Stratton's governorship, 82 of the state's 102 county GOP chairmen held state jobs.

With patronage jobs mostly gone today, Gov. Bruce Rauner controls his party's apparatus with money instead. He has infused the state party with millions from his own pocketbook and struck the fear of God (that is, of well-funded opposition) into the hearts of any of his own party's lawmakers who might oppose him.

No governor before Rauner has come into office with the overriding objective of the equivalent of driving the money changers out of the temple, that is, of forcing Democratic House Speaker Mike Madigan into submission.

So maybe history provides little useful guidance for the present.

I do think the most effective Illinois governors have wheeled-and-dealed with the opposition to achieve their objectives, in what until recent decades had always been a politically balanced state.

Rauner has rejected this approach, instead demanding for the past year a take-it-or-leave-it "turnaround agenda."

Thus far the governor has been unsuccessful in his paramount objective of forcing the House speaker to knuckle under to the agenda.

The question is whether the long-term costs imposed on the state during the Rauner-Madigan conflict, such as the failure to fund higher education for a year, are worth the benefits he hopes will flow from the uncertainty of success in humbling Madigan.

Rauner appears to have broken the mold for the Illinois governorship. His backers say it had to be done to overcome entrenched failure.

Yet I have my doubts a state as diverse as Illinois can ever be effectively governed by attempted fiat.