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State of corruption: A history of insatiable greed

From Sunday's print edition:

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OK, Illinois, let's be honest about our dishonesty.

We've put an impressive collection of cheats and boodlers into public office over the decades, and the public outcry has never led to more than a token crackdown by government.

So why should the curious case of Rod Blagojevich now make things different? One reason, perhaps, is that the December arrest of Illinois' now-ousted governor has reduced Illinois politics to a late-night TV punch line. ("Scumdog Million-Hairs" is Jon Stewart's nickname for the amply maned Blagojevich.)

There's an even more compelling reason, and it's one to contemplate as you write that enormous property tax check this month or when you file your state income tax return in April: Pernicious corruption costs you every day in bloated government and inefficient services.

No-bid contracts get inflated to cover the costs of the campaign cash needed to grease them. Public jobs too often go to the connected and lazy instead of the best, brightest and most eager.

We all pay.

That's hardly a revelation. But all of a sudden, in the wake of Blagojevich's downfall, the new buzzword in Springfield has become accountability. Even veteran pols who have yawned past earlier high-profile scandals are scrambling to one-up each other with reform gestures.

Pat Quinn, the self-styled crusader who succeeded Blagojevich as governor, formed a corruption commission. Legislative leaders countered with their own in-house panel of experts. Separately, Atty. Gen Lisa Madigan, a likely Quinn rival for governor in 2010, is positioning herself as the champion of open government.

But if it seems like you've heard it all before, it's because you have. As the Tribune begins a campaign against the Illinois culture of political sleaze, it's worth noting that the history of that culture is long and sullied, and that past efforts to reform it have been half-hearted. Think of all the blue-ribbon ethics panels, their reports typically gathering dust in a file drawer right next to all those expert studies on how to reform school funding.

Reform chatter often spikes when the feds swoop down on City Hall or the Statehouse—a stunningly frequent happening. Mostly, such talk is just that.

Tsunamis of cash still flood political coffers in one of the most wide open and loosely regulated campaign-finance systems in the country. Insiders still score the big

government contracts. Government records remain hidden from public view.

There's an old joke about the loosey-goosey ethical climate of Chicago and Illinois politics:

The devil promises boundless fortune and perpetual re-election to a prominent local officeholder.

"The only thing is that you must give your immortal soul for all time," the devil warns.

"What's the catch?" the politician asks.

Rod Blagojevich didn't invent crooked politics in Illinois, though if the charges of rampant shakedowns and hanging a "for sale" sign on a vacant U.S. Senate seat are true—and he insists they are not—he may have raised the art form.

Consider this recent box score toted by political scientists at the University of Illinois at Chicago: 1,000 public officials and businessmen convicted of public corruption in Illinois since 1970, including three governors, 19 Cook County judges and 30 Chicago City Council members.

Corruption has been embedded in Illinois' political DNA since pioneer days. European immigrants found jobs and housing easier to come by if they helped keep the powers-that-be in power.

"The social compact in this state was built on corruption," said Cindi Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. "It worked very well for some people."

In the 1880s, the utilities and streetcar companies that helped transform the city into an industrial powerhouse gained exclusive franchises through huge payoffs to public officials. By Prohibition, Al Capone had much of City Hall and the police force in his pocket.

Truth be told, many of us sometimes get a perverse kick out of the bad-boy image of our state.

But the toll can go beyond mere dollars and cents. At its heart, the licenses for bribes scandal that sent former Gov. George Ryan to prison was a boilerplate case of arrogance and greed. Its symbol, though, became the haunting faces of six children who died in a fiery crash caused by an unqualified trucker who illegally bought his license.

Ryan's downfall spurred both the election of Blagojevich, who campaigned as a reformer, and another round of reform talk. All this was just another example of how reform gets turned on its head.

Inspector general posts at top state agencies were created to root out miscreants on the public payroll. But the law mandated that virtually all details of wrongdoing uncovered by internal watchdogs be kept secret.

Speaking of the legislature, state lawmakers long have also made sure they are not bound by the some of the same laws imposed on other public bodies in Illinois to force them do their work in the open.

Springfield isn't the only place where "reform" measures resemble Rube Goldberg-like contraptions that serve to shield those who designed them.

Mayor Richard Daley in 2005 issued an executive order barring donations to him from city contractors, their owners or the owner's spouses. It was chock full of loopholes. Earlier, Daley's patronage office devised an elaborate ruse to get around a court-order barring politics in hiring. Federal prosecutors finally caught on and five former aides to the mayor were convicted.

Chicago also has an inspector general, former prosecutor David Hoffman. But the City Council has voted to wall itself off from Hoffman's prying. "In some of our investigations, this has stopped us from moving in certain logical directions," said Hoffman.

One thing that sets Illinois apart from other states is the almost complete lack of limits on political fundraising. That has bred a high stakes money game where the line between legitimate fundraising and extortion is razor thin. Savvy politicians dance on the edge by adopting a wink-and-a-nod code with special-interest donors.

A decade ago, then-City Treasurer Miriam Santos skipped the nuance and went to prison for ordering a city contractor to "belly up" with a \$10,000 contribution—or else. The irony was that Santos tried the squeeze to meet a fundraising quota demanded of her by state Democratic Party Chairman Michael Madigan, who was not implicated.

As Illinois House Speaker, Madigan is spearheading the legislature's post-Blagojevich reform drive. He has been a Springfield powerhouse for nearly four decades and no one has ever accused him of being a change agent. That may be a secret to his longevity, explained Rutgers University political scientist Alan Rosenthal.

"Members are comfortable with the rules they've played by, and when you change those rules there's increased uncertainty and members don't like it," said Rosenthal, an expert on ethics in state legislatures.

If the status quo is finally broken, in a perverse sense we may have Rod Blagojevich to thank.

"Right this moment we have the perfect storm of scandal, public anger, a huge financial crisis and a citizenry not completely sure they still trust the foxes to guard the henhouse. Not to mention we are an international joke." Canary said.

"All of these things combine to give us an opening we've never had before."

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