

## Hot Rod Lincoln

He knew that he was destined for greatness. The son of uneducated manual laborers, immigrants to Illinois, he was never much of a student, but he would become a successful lawyer. From a young age, though, his sights were set on political power. Through his political connections, he got himself elected to the Illinois House of Representatives and, later, to the U.S. Congress from Illinois. Gregarious when he wanted to be, he was known to all by his monosyllabic three-letter nickname, not his trisyllabic given name.

He was well liked by some, but despised by others. Very few people had a neutral opinion, and even some of those who liked him and supported him in his rise to power were disturbed by his odd, self-centered behavior. He seemed unable to show much human emotion for those around him.

Whatever else anyone might have thought of him, he was a masterful politician, attacking corruption while engaging in inside deals that helped him both politically and personally. Unhappy with the location of the Illinois capitol, he essentially moved it to where he was living. But his ambitions extended beyond Illinois, and he needed money and backing to fulfill his dream of rising from his modest roots to the highest office in the land. Washington beckoned, and nothing would stand in his way.

Or, at least, that is what Gov. Milorad "Rod" Blagojevich thought right up until the phone rang at 6 A.M. on December 9, 2008, waking him at his home on Chicago's North Side, which he had transformed into the *de facto* capitol of the state of Illinois. That same phone had been his undoing, and at a press conference later that morning, federal investigators outlined a 76-page indictment filed in U.S. district court, which detailed numerous calls made to and from that phone.

In selections from the transcripts of those calls, Governor Blagojevich re-

peatedly instructed aides to hold up \$8 million in state funds for a children's hospital until the head of the hospital coughed up a \$50,000 donation to Friends of Blagojevich; discussed using \$1.8 billion in state funds as a reward to a public contractor, a road builder, if only he would raise a half-million dollars for the governor's war chest by the end of 2008, when new campaign-finance rules would go into effect; and tried to tie state assistance to the struggling Tribune Company, owner of the *Chicago Tribune* and the Chicago Cubs, to the firing of a writer for the *Tribune* who had penned editorials critical of Blagojevich's conduct as governor.

The press conference was conducted by Patrick Fitzgerald, the U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, who had successfully prosecuted Blagojevich's predecessor, Republican Gov. George Ryan, on 18 counts of racketeering and fraud. Ryan had had the good sense to decline to run for reelection as the feds closed the net about him, and so he, like felonious former Democratic governors Dan Walker and Otto Kerner, avoided indictment while still in office.

Blagojevich not only ran for reelection in 2006 knowing that he was being investigated but as late as the day before his arrest declared to reporters that investigators were free to listen to his conversations because he had nothing to hide. Still, the transcripts showed that he was looking for a way out of the governor's office so that he could rehabilitate his reputation—for a run for the presidency in 2016.

Milorad was probably too busy getting his trademark Serbian gangster hairdo coiffed for court that afternoon, but if he had a chance to listen to Fitzgerald's press conference, the man who had consciously modeled himself on Honest Abe was likely cut to the bone when Fitzgerald declared, "The conduct would make Lincoln roll over in his grave." Of course, Rod



shares more with Abe than the Brooklyn-born Fitzgerald would like to think. The railmen who bankrolled Lincoln could teach today's blacktop bosses of Illinois a thing or two. And as President, Lincoln didn't need to use financial persuasion to halt criticisms of his conduct; he could—and did—simply sign an executive order for the arrest and imprisonment of "the editors, proprietors, and publishers" of newspapers and prohibit "any further publication therefrom."

No, if Lincoln was doing anything in his grave on December 9, 2008, he was probably thanking the God he didn't believe in that Alexander Graham Bell hadn't invented the telephone until 12 years after his last Good Friday.

Most of Governor Blagojevich's transgressions were politics as usual here in the Land of Lincoln, but Fitzgerald was compelled to act when it became clear that Blago was attempting to sell Barack Obama's soon-to-be-vacant Senate seat to the highest bidder. But what about our new President himself? Time will tell, but some of us in Illinois could not help but chuckle when the President-elect—another politician who modeled himself on Honest Abe—announced that the centerpiece of his New New Deal would be the biggest load of asphalt since the construction of the Interstate Highway System. One thing is certain: The appointment of outgoing Illinois congressman Ray LaHood (R-Blacktop) as transportation secretary had little to do with bipartisanship.

You can take the boy out of Illinois, but you can't take Illinois out of the boy. ◊

## Letter From Carolina

by Clyde Wilson

### The Class of '59: Intimations of Mortality and Posterity



Some good folks in my hometown are planning a reunion of my high-school class, which, come June, will have graduated 50 years ago. It was a class of about 500. Three hundred are known, of which 53 are already deceased. (Our average age is 67.) It is a strange and unsettling experience to contemplate the death of people whom I last saw in the flourish of youth, some of whom I had known since the first grade, and some of whom I thought were great in vitality and would probably outlive me. About 200 are as yet untracked, and some of those will doubtless be missing also when the roll is called.

It was the last all-white class in my city. The junior class had already begun token desegregation with one black girl. Most folks looked on that with distaste or apprehension. The more enlightened, who had been to Chapel Hill, felt that it was the correct thing, providing justice to the more deserving of a group that had suffered denial of opportunity and serving to make us look good in the opinion of the United Nations, which good opinion, for some reason, we were supposed to covet. At any rate it was inevitable and, we were assured, would be gradual and limited in scope.

Our class was about 85-percent Carolina Anglo-Celtic (if you count as Anglo-Celtic a number of ancestors who had the good sense to leave Germany in the late 17th and early 18th centuries). About ten percent were carpetbaggers, who were being happily and painlessly civilized, and about five percent Other, perfectly accepted. The high school encompassed the entire white population within the city limits. There were the children of mill-

hands and the children of mill owners. I do not recall any class conflict (although it is true that the snootier of the rich youth had departed for private academies in Virginia or military schools). Standing was based on sex appeal, athletic prowess, sociability, and, a distant fourth, academic achievement. As editor of the school newspaper, unathletic and unclubbable, my status was somewhat indeterminate. I did have on my staff a future lady author of salacious novels and the daughters of a famous poet and a well-known historian. In those quaint days our sports teams were known as the Purple Whirlwinds, or Whirlies for short.

Everybody had kinfolk in World War II and not a few had them in the large section of a cemetery devoted to casualties returned from Europe (like my uncle) or the Pacific. Most, if they had cared to, could claim eligibility in the Sons or Daughters of the Confederacy, and a majority probably in the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution. We had all been raised in the horrific shadow of the atomic Cold War and Korea, where a local fellow had been an ace. We had a certain feigned fecklessness as a result. Vietnam had not yet been heard of. Never in life since have I found the girls sweeter or lovelier.

We were Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians, in that order of magnitude. There were a few Jews and Catholics. Many of the first two thought it a sin to go to the movies or a ball game on Sundays, and that one drink was a certain road to Hell (which is sometimes true). There was no parochial high school in town, but there was a large hospital run by the exotic Sisters of Charity. I sold newspapers there every morning and afternoon, and my violently Protestant great-aunt was housemother to the nursing students, almost all of them non-Romanist locals. She would omit the word *catholic* in the Creed the same way some good folks like to omit "one nation indivisi-

ble" from the Pledge of Allegiance.

There is no need to wax nostalgic. Wherever there is Man there is sin, suffering, and sorrow, and, as someone has said, youth is greatly overrated. Farmers and workmen, of both races, could still be seen in those days in bib overalls and shirtless, and a few people still came to town in a wagon led by a mule. Most of us children and some adults went barefoot in the summer except to church. A great many older people had a very limited education. Spittoons were common. No question that folks, white and black, enjoy a higher standard of living today—though they also seem a good deal more harried and discontented and somehow alienated in a way not known in poorer times. Spontaneous music making, humor, innate dignity, good manners, and kindness are much rarer now.

Government was in the hands of local gentry, who were generally honest and easy on taxes, which they knew the working majority could ill afford. The two newspapers and one television station were locally owned and reflected, to a considerable extent, local culture and opinion. The lords of industry, if not all local, were all in-state and known. Neighborhoods were segregated, but not as rigidly as in the North. There was much peaceful overlap, especially in the older parts of town and in the rural fringes.

A child lost in any part of town was sure to find help and kindness. At nine or ten years of age I would ride the bus downtown on Saturday and stay all day watching movie serials, dining on hot dogs and Dr. Pepper, and perusing the comic books at the newsstand. It occurred to no one that a child alone might be in any danger, though it was a real city. We had a skyscraper of 17 stories, the tallest in the state, unmatched even by Charlotte. Still, you could not go anywhere in public without encountering someone you knew.

The violent "nonviolent civil-rights protests," for which our city would