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State of corruption

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One governor imprisoned at the gray-bar hotel, another heaved out of office—and in each case, the corruption of our body politic exposed. Headlines speak of bold crimes, self-serving schemes and raw unfairnesses that suffuse our statehouse, our county buildings, our city halls.

Which begs a simple question: Does each of us care enough to demand better?

Because until now—scandal after infuriating scandal, election after lackadaisical election—our customary answer has been: No, not really, this is how it is here.

We, the 12 million-plus people of Illinois, haven't behaved as if we know we're both co-conspirators and victims: We haven't asked enough integrity from our public officials, from our laws and from the people paid to enforce them. But we also haven't asked enough integrity from ourselves.

Today's newspaper marks the launch—on the news pages and on the editorial page—of a Chicago Tribune campaign against the Illinois culture of political sleaze. We speak of culture, not just of crime, because citizens of this state have been ravaged and disadvantaged by offenses from outright thievery to lawful deception: For every pol who allegedly tries to sell a U.S. Senate seat, hundreds of others are exploiting us for personal or political gain. Changing that culture of sleaze will mean appreciating that we've all been cheated as much by favors as by fraud. The proven cost of conniving and clout in this state ranges from whose children get the choice jobs to whose children get incinerated in the van wreck.

Survey results in today's Tribune suggest that citizens see our state as shovel-ready for reform. If so, we'll need more than hopeful thoughts. We'll need to know how insiders seized so many of our governments, and we'll need an agenda for seizing them back.

We'll also need to reconsider, yes, our perverse pride in "how it is here"—our sly boasts

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about corrupt officials as if they were latter-day Al Capones. We should quell that temptation by remembering how, a decade ago, crashes caused by truckers who had paid bribes for Illinois licenses killed nine innocents: Did people die so we could crack wise about our culture of corruption?

An agenda for Illinois Step One in eradicating that culture, paradoxically, is realizing how well it works for so many among us—some needy but some greedy. Consider the temptations:

Our border signs should proclaim "The Government State": Illinois has 6,994 units of government—counties, municipalities, school districts and so on. Pennsylvania (4,871) ranks a distant second. Each Illinois government has authority and, usually, a budget. So there are understandable reasons why people can be frantic to influence governments—like banks, they're where the money is. The power of our officials to give jobs, to issue contracts and to grant requests can profoundly change lives and fortunes.

What of that is corrupt and what is, as criminal defendants often whimper, "just politics"? Former federal prosecutor Patrick Collins, head of a reform commission now examining state government, offers a simple test: If someone wants to conceal a government act, odds are it's illicit.

Attacking the secrecy that shrouds so much of government in Illinois will be one focus of the Tribune's coverage: Each of us should be able to police the spending of his or her tax dollars. This coverage also will isolate practices as subtle as the gerrymandering of politicians' district lines to guarantee easy re-elections—and as overt as the Chicago City Council's insulation of itself from investigation by the city's inspector general. You'll read fresh explorations of how donors finance campaigns in this state—and of whether that can be restricted without gutting our 1st Amendment protections.

Other areas of concern: Can we entice state and local prosecutors to more aggressively pursue public corruption—a duty that until now they've left largely to the feds? Can we empower our majority of law-abiding public servants to help make every government in Illinois more honest and fair?

How, that is, does the Prairie State grow healthier public lawns and crowd out its noxious weeds?

No newspaper, no citizenry, can change human nature so much as to end betrayal of public trust. Together, though, all of us can make the costs of betrayal higher—and its consequences at the polling place severe.

Silencing the Illinois Lullaby Illinois lawmakers used the impeachment and trial of a sitting governor to tell the rest of us about their devotion to cleaner and more open government. They sang an Illinois Lullaby of words both obtuse and soothing:

transparency, ethics, accountability. They warbled that they're "open to change" and "willing to discuss."

Not good enough. Time to silence the Illinois Lullaby and get on with dramatic changes to how Illinois government treats the people of this state. One goal of the Tribune's effort will be to sort genuine reform proposals from phony suggestions that slyly insulate the status quo. We've let our pols get away with that for far too long. From now on, let's judge our elected officials by their effectiveness or impotence at *delivering reform*. Enough with "effort." Illinois needs results.

Thwarting the opportunists The challenge for all of us will be to sustain our demand for those results. Time and again, Illinois pols have slow-walked reforms. They know that the rest of us tend to get bored or distracted.

That means we'll need to remind ourselves of how corruption costs each one of us: The dishonest officeholder teaches us cynicism about our government, our democracy. The agency that hires from a patronage list cheats more qualified applicants of a shot at a job. The board that promotes someone in order to inflate his or her pension calculation embitters private-sector workers who will have no pensions at all. The bureaucrat who clouts a contract to his boss' contributor repays a donation with our tax dollars.

Worst of all, perhaps, corruption leaves too many of us apathetic. If everybody thinks the fix is in, then nobody believes. Nobody cares.

That sort of lassitude got us where we are. We've surrendered too much of government in Illinois—too much of *our responsibility*—to crooks and opportunists.

The taking of Illinois has happened over many decades: Our culture of political sleaze is a muscular beast that won't easily die.

Never in our lifetimes, though, has a scandal left that culture so vulnerable to the threat of real reform. Those of us at the Tribune promise our best effort to make that reform happen. Together, let's not squander this unique and emboldening moment.

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