

Chicago Swerves Hard Left

by Conrad Black



One of the signs of the many seismic shifts in American political life is the collapse, at least tentatively, after 88 years, of the Democratic Party machine in Chicago. There is a good deal of celebration in the leftist circles that seem to be sweeping the Democratic Party nationally, as Rahm Emanuel, the quintessence of Clinton and Obama Democrats (he served both presidents in high and close office), is retiring after two terms as mayor. The Left sees this as the rejection and retreat of machine politics and government by a relatively rich veteran of Wall Street as well as the senior echelons of the White House staff. That assessment could be premature.

Conservatives have not been prominent in Chicago since the days of the last Republican mayor, William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson, a reactionary blowhard who pitched to the city's Irish and German communities by promising to "punch King George V on the nose." Although a Republican, he was such a

scoundrel that when he died in 1944, the *Chicago Tribune*, published by the archconservative but formidably successful [Colonel Robert R. McCormick](#), commented: "For Chicago Thompson has meant filth, corruption, idiocy, and bankruptcy . . . He has given the city an international reputation for moronic buffoonery, barbaric crime, triumphant hoodlumism, unchecked graft, and a dejected citizenry . . . He made Chicago a byword for the collapse of American civilization . . . and excelled himself as a liar and defamer."

This was not altogether unjust, and Anton Cermak inaugurated the mighty Democratic reign in Chicago as a reformer in 1931. He was from Bohemia and worked as a miner and then a municipal stable-boy, operator of a horse-cart-delivered firewood business, and then a hauler, and led the movement to unify Chicago's ethnic groups for the Democrats. He replied to Thompson's ethnic jibes by saying he didn't come to America on the Mayflower, "But I came as soon as I could."

Cermak came into office riding a wave of revulsion against Thompson and municipal outrage at the world-publicized St. Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929, in which Al Capone's gunmen disguised as policemen and, allegedly with some police complicity, murdered seven members of a rival Irish gang. Cermak also benefited from the anxiety caused by the rising Great Depression.

After Cermak's accidental murder in Miami in 1933 (the gunman, an anarchist, was aiming at the president-elect, Franklin D. Roosevelt), the Kelly-Nash Democratic machine thoroughly installed itself. Edward Kelly had entered the workforce when he was 10. He became the head of the city's sanitation department and patronized sewage contractor Patrick Nash, who propelled Kelly forward as he made himself the Democratic chairman of America's most populous county, Cook, which included Chicago and most of its suburbs.

Because of its central location, Chicago was often the site of

presidential nominating conventions, and because of Chicago's preeminence in Illinois, the mayor exercised enormous influence in the Democratic conventions in that city, and in presidential elections. Kelly and Nash helped nominate FDR in a tight race in 1932. In 1940, the convention keynote speaker, Senate Majority Leader Alban W. Barkley of Kentucky, read a letter from President Roosevelt stating the president's wish to retire, and the freedom of delegates to vote for whomever they wished. The Kelly machine, by prearrangement, took over the convention; from the basement of the Chicago Stadium, a barrel-chested city official shouted into a microphone connected to the public address system: "We want Roosevelt!" The cry was repeated—"Alabama wants Roosevelt! New York wants Roosevelt! . . ." etc., endlessly and the packed galleries erupted and sang "Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones" and other songs identified with the incumbent. Thus did FDR, with the thinnest facsimile of a draft, break a tradition as old as the nation and "reluctantly" accept renomination to a third term.

In 1944, when FDR was about to seek a fourth term to win the war and the peace, he convened the supreme party barons for dinner at the White House to decide on the vice presidential nominee. It was understood that Vice President Henry A. Wallace, a leftist and eccentric spiritualist who had been a good secretary of agriculture, had to be dumped. Ed Kelly was one of only eight people present, such was the political influence of Chicago, and in effect, another outstanding president was selected to succeed FDR: Harry Truman.

When the Free French leader Charles de Gaulle came to Chicago in July 1944, one month before he was acclaimed by millions of people in liberated Paris, Kelly told him: "You will be cheered today in 74 languages" as they started on a motor tour through the city, where more than 1 million people came out to greet them. The Irish were politically successful in Chicago because they were the only ethnic group that spoke English, and they ran the gamut from the bottom of the working class to

the socioeconomic heights of the city; and because they were an island in their home country, they had no quarrel with the homelands of the other ethnic groups. The British-descended Chicagoans were all original Americans, not English or Scottish, and the Germans, Dutch, Poles, Serbs, Italians, Russians, and so forth, all transported their irredentist squabbles from the old world to the wards of Chicago. In such chaos, the Irish reigned.

In 1947, the Kelly regime (Nash had died in 1943) had become flagrantly corrupt. Kelly had also opposed segregation and said that African-Americans should be free to live where they wished. This was anathema to the white working class ethnic base of the governing majority and Kelly was shown the exit in favor of Martin Kennelly. Kennelly was a prominent businessman who was promoted by Jake Arvey, the new (Jewish) Cook County Democratic chairman, who championed Adlai Stevenson as governor and Paul Douglas as U.S. senator from Illinois. Both men were elected by large majorities in 1948.

Kennelly had two terms, but was a well-to-do man who had taken an apartment in the working-class Bridgeport area to run for mayor, but was now a lofty social reformer, and the city and county machine dispensed with him and coalesced around Richard J. Daley, the Cook County chairman. He became one of the most supremely powerful and effective mayors in American history, rivaled only by Fiorello La Guardia of New York among earlier mayors, and perhaps Rudolph W. Giuliani since.

Daley preserved the city's double-A credit rating, kept the downtown vibrant, and maintained its high architectural and cultural heritage. He is generally credited with stealing Illinois for John F. Kennedy in 1960 (there was just an 8,000 vote margin out of 5 million votes and some ballot boxes are officially still missing). He also mishandled the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic convention and got into a nasty slanging match with former Connecticut Governor Abraham Ribicoff. Daley ultimately was thrown out as a

delegate in 1972 by the leftist George McGovern forces. He was restored in 1976, however, and nominee Jimmy Carter made a special parade through the convention hall to welcome him back as a delegate.

The Democrats have gradually declined in Chicago since that time. Daley died in office in 1976, and eventually his son Richard M. Daley succeeded him, from 1989 to 2011. He was not especially distinguished and would probably have lost had he run again. Rahm Emanuel has been a failure, and latterly spent most of his energy declaring Chicago "a Trump-free zone." Most Chicagoans are happier that it will soon be, in official terms, an Emanuel-free zone.

The enthusiasm of the leftist reformers banished the third Daley, Richard M.'s brother, William, who spent \$8.65 million on his primary campaign. The former commerce secretary under President Obama and chief of staff for President Clinton came behind two African-American women, one a declared lesbian, in the Democratic primary, and they are in a run-off. But the shrieks of joy and triumph of reformers are premature. An Ocasio-Cortez-like rebellion will not cleanse Chicago. Only a strong Republican candidate like Giuliani and the early Michael Bloomberg will do that. Look for William Daley or his nephew in four years.

First published in