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Shaw Thoughts: Political corruption not limited to Chicago or Illinois

## Description

*The following Shaw Thoughts column appeared in the [June 2011 issue of Shore Magazine](#):*

Ever since venerated East Coast writer A.J. Liebling foisted the condescending label "Second City" on Chicago more than half a century ago, ignoring our preference for "Windy City," Chicago's political and civic leaders have done everything possible to shed Liebling's pejorative put-down by scrambling for a "first this," a "biggest that," a "best" whatever. The most obvious example is probably the Sears (now Willis) Tower, which enjoyed the "World's Tallest Building" moniker for years until the record was broken by skyscrapers in other countries.

Chicago earned another ignominious but sadly appropriate epithet years ago as "America's Most Corrupt City," gleaned from a history that includes mobster Al Capone and his lackey, Mayor William "Big Bill" Thompson; the so-called "Lords of the Levee," pimp politicians "Bathhouse John" Coughlin and "Hinky Dink" McKenna; Alderman Paddy "Chicago ain't ready for reform" Bauler; the first Mayor Daley, who made the quaint saying "vote early and often" a stark reality by facilitating the dubious razor-thin Illinois victory that carried John Kennedy to the presidency in 1960; and an endless succession of pols who traded their fancy threads for federal prison jumpsuits.

Measuring corruption is an inexact science that's part conviction stats and part public perception, so other cities gave Chicago a run for its money over the years, including Newark, New Orleans, New York, Boston and Miami.

But I got a real shock recently from an article on corruption in Lake County, Northwest Indiana's answer to "Crook" I mean Cook County, and found that, on a per capita basis, Lake County prosecutors send 3-1/2 crooked pols to jail for every wayward public official sent to the slammer in Cook. The story also related a comment Robert Kennedy supposedly made in 1962, when he was brother Jack's Attorney General, that Lake was the "most corrupt [county] in the nation."

Corruption is probably worse in Lake County than Chicago, according to former prosecutor G. Robert Blakey, who wrote the racketeering statutes for Kennedy's Justice Department and helped

draft a lawsuit charging former East Chicago mayor Robert Pastrick and 24 codefendants with running the city as a "criminal enterprise."

Pastrick's successor, George Pabey, was indicted for political corruption last year, validating the aphorism that "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Gary attorney Greg Reising says that in a one-party (Democratic) county like Lake, "you don't have constituents, you have friends. And you take care of your friends."

The article annoyed Schererville attorney Calvin Bellamy, president of the Shared Ethics Advisory Committee, an all-volunteer agency that provides ethics training to public employees in five Lake County communities—Crown Point, Highland, Munster, Schererville and Whiting. They've developed a Shared Ethics Code that spells out the principles of ethical government behavior in a manual that's used in training sessions of 45 minutes to two hours.

"Our multi-community approach is unique," Bellamy says. "It's essential to establishing an ethical culture in our area. We would rather try than simply fret about the problem."

The goal is to eventually train all 1,037 public employees in the five communities on the principles of a government that's run for the benefit of the public, not the public officials. That's music to my ears, now that I've traded in my political reporter's hat for an advocate's soapbox at the Better Government Association, an anti-corruption watchdog group in Chicago. Our mantra is that "We're Watching—we're shining a light on government and holding public officials accountable."

The effort is beginning to make a difference. Cook County elected reform-minded Toni Preckwinkle as its president last fall, and Chicago chose a new mayor, Rahm Emanuel, who's endorsed an ethics agenda that sounds like our BGA mission statement.

Reform is also wafting into Northwest Indiana, according to a survey by Bellamy's group of several hundred public employees who've received ethics training since '05. Nearly twice as many are now aware of the advisory council's ethics code, and nearly three times as many understand how to report a colleague's questionable conduct, which is a key to elevating public sector behavior.

Bellamy's commission partners invited me to their ethics conference in Merrillville in early March, where I told the group it's intolerable for public officials to treat our hard-earned tax dollars like it's their money, and the way to change a "culture of corruption" that's unaffordable financially and morally is through transparency, widespread civic engagement and forceful public advocacy. Preach, teach and reach.

Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis put it best nearly a century ago when he said, "Sunshine is the best disinfectant." You can't assess or change what you can't see.

Better government is our right, it's their responsibility, and if we keep holding public officials' feet to the fire, we can make it reality. That would be a "Number 1" to be proud of in Cook or Lake County.