

Living In Madigan-i-istan, After The Boss Squirrel's Exit



Michael Madigan, "The Velvet Hammer"

by [Matt Rosenberg](#) (March 2022)

I'm out for a stroll one perfect late afternoon in mid-November 2020 and end up at McKinley Park on Chicago's Southwest Side. On the long leafy stretch of 37th Street bordering the park on the north, goose graffiti covers the walkways. They own the big landscaped ponds and know it. The ducks give them a wide berth. Pulling up on eastbound 37th by the statue of the assassinated President is a tall, brawny SUV thumping and pumping with metalloïd beats. Music of the future apocalypse. The door flies open and a guy with dense neck tattoos emerges to stretch his legs. Very loosely from the bottle's tip he's holding a two-thirds-drained quart of Budweiser. I get a big whiff of another kind of bud. A bleary female rider leans out to summon someone from a group congregated near McKinley's cast-bronze likeness.

At the park's edge someone has left a carved Halloween jack-o-lantern under a tree for the squirrels. Several are gorging on the slowly rotting gourd but none more so than the little bushy-tailed guy sitting atop it with a knowing mein. This is the squirrel *capo*. He takes what he wants; how he wants; when he wants. He decides who else gets to nibble and for how long.

Now walk with me. Because for more than thirty-six years that squirrel was Michael Madigan. The Democratic majority leader of the Illinois House of Representatives. Known variously as Mr. Speaker, "The Real Governor of Illinois," or "The Velvet Hammer."

Madigan – himself now finally [indicted by federal prosecutors March 2 on 22 counts of racketeering and bribery](#) – was a Southwest Side Chicago guy. His father was a ward superintendent for the city's Department of Streets and Sanitation. It's an anachronistic make-work job of the sort in which Chicago specialized. Madigan's first political job was on the back of a city garbage truck. He got a Loyola University (of Chicago) law degree and became a Democratic ward committeeman.

That's a political field operations chief for one of the city's local electoral districts. A ward committeeman "sends" people to other sub-potentates with a recommendation for hiring or other favors. Early on someone actually articulated a rule about this to a young Abner Mikva, later a Congressman, then a federal judge: "we don't want nobody nobody sent." This was Chicago's DNA.

With the blessing of his mentor Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, Madigan got elected to the state legislature in 1970. He rose high. Except for a two-year relegation to the minority party, he was Democratic Majority Leader of the Illinois State House of Representatives from 1983 until January of 2021. Speaker of the House. His own district was the state legislature's 22nd. Its eastern border is just about a mile

southwest from McKinley Park, where his squirrel analog was presiding over the spoils of the rotting pumpkin.

Speaker Madigan and other legislators joined with a Republican Governor in 1989 to support legislation that would drive city and state public employee pension debt astronomically higher. City of Chicago and even state efforts to later roll back the compounded three percent annual cost of living increases in pensioner benefits were stiff-armed by the Illinois Supreme Court's Democratic majority.

During Madigan's reign in the state capital of Springfield, Illinois' unfunded liabilities owed to its pensioners went from \$41 billion in 2006 to \$144 billion by mid-2020. Then by one very credible estimate that more than doubled. With less rosy market-based projected investment returns for state pension funds, unfunded state pension obligations rose to north of \$300 billion. This according to a first-quarter 2021 forecast from Moody's bond-rating service. By 2020 the state's five big public employee pension funds were only forty percent funded compared to required future pay-outs. The industry standard is no less than ninety percent.

Under Madigan's leadership the state's bond rating was described as "[worst in the nation...near junk status.](#)" During his tenure the state's income tax rose by two-thirds. Among the fifty states, Illinois from 2003 to 2017 had the third highest ratio of accrued pension liability growth relative to economic growth. On average over that span states had grown their pension liability at a rate one-and-a-half times state gross domestic product (GDP). But in Illinois it grew at three times the rate of state GDP.

None of this harmed Madigan politically. Not with his own party. Nor with voters who kept his party in power.

No. What got him in the end was those munching squirrels around his rotting pumpkin.

So many Madigan allies had been slotted into jobs at the electric bureau at Chicago's Streets and Sanitation Department that it would be called "[Madigan Electric](#)." But there weren't enough city jobs for all of them. Another big landing strip was needed. And conveniently, the state's biggest electric utility, Commonwealth Edison, needed Madigan's cooperation to push through a big rate hike structure plus other measures pressed by their huge team of lobbyists.

There was a price to pay. More than expected, it turned out. In July 2020, ComEd admitted to a bribery scheme to win Madigan's influence over legislation and agreed to fork over \$200 million in fines to avoid federal prosecution. Prosecutors had detailed a big back-scratching pact which included \$1.32 million for do-nothing hires or consultants sent by Madigan.

These were somebodies that a Big Somebody had sent.

The make-work ComEd jobs and contracts for Madigan's minions were allegedly blessed by the public utility's CEO. Others were involved; one company official had already pleaded guilty in 2019 for his involvement.

A 2020 report from the Illinois Public Interest Research Group asserted ComEd had benefitted handsomely from 2011 and 2013 bills Madigan had eased into law. A rate hike structure was approved and then constricting state regulatory actions and authority were rescinded. The utility's profits grew by nearly half and consumer costs for energy delivery services by more than a third.

His spokesman said Madigan had only *recommended* certain hires and had never said they should do no work. But some recommendations carry a lot of weight.

This was how other major units of government and big companies got things done in the Illinois state legislature. You carried favor with The Speaker.

In November of 2020 the now-former ComEd CEO Anne Pramaggiore was among four individuals indicted by federal prosecutors for the scheme. They were each charged with bribery conspiracy, bribery, and willfully falsifying ComEd books and records.

Madigan and one of the earlier-charged allies were indicted anew in early March of 2022 for running the “Madigan Enterprise” – an alleged and wide-ranging *quid pro quo* scheme wherein he and his associates are said to have conspired to shake down governmental supplicants by demanding jobs or business for the Enterprise’s allies.

One of those indicted earlier was John Hooker. He was a top ComEd lobbying exec, then an external lobbyist for the utility, and was board chief of the Chicago Housing Authority under Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who served from 2011 to 2019. We’ll hear more about Hooker.

Prosecutors until Madigan’s March 2022 indictment referred to him in filed court papers only as “Public Official A” – but specified him unmistakably. The one around whom everything allegedly revolved. As in the July settlement between the feds and ComEd, Madigan wasn’t charged in the November 2020 indictments. But the quiet understandings implicit in the alleged buying of power were made more clear in federal documents released at the time of the July 2020 deferred prosecution agreement with ComEd.

‘That Which Is Understood Need Not Be Mentioned’

The arrangements were made “to keep (Public Official A) happy, I think it’s worth it, because you’d hear otherwise,” one principal said. “Your money comes from Springfield,” he warned a top ComEd official.

The tit-for-tat nature of the operation, another said, was “unmentioned, but you know, that which is understood need not

be mentioned.”

It brought to mind a remark attributed to one of Louisiana’s many scoundrel governors, Earl Long. “Don’t write anything you can phone. Don’t phone anything you can talk. Don’t talk anything you can whisper. Don’t whisper anything you can smile. Don’t smile anything you can nod. Don’t nod anything you can wink.”

The July 2020 settlement between ComEd and the feds and Madigan’s perceived central role in the budding scandal was bad optics for Illinois Democrats. They lost a bit of ground in the November 2020 state elections. Then a few weeks later came the four indictments. Under pressure from his party Madigan resigned first as Speaker, then state representative, then state party chair.

Madigan’s thirty-six-year run as the Boss of Illinois is a road map to what’s wrong with the state. Chicagoans are already on the hook for a staggering tab of about \$170 billion in public employee pension obligations owed through 2055. The state’s own \$300 billion mountain of poorly-funded public pension obligations puts taxpayers on notice that greener pastures beckon.

Illinois had as of 2021 an astounding 8,923 governmental taxing bodies, two-thirds of them special purpose. There are odd entities called townships. Road districts, sanitation districts, park districts, more than a few tiny school districts. Each with their own taxing authority, capital projects, payrolls, and pensions.

The effective tax rate on owner occupied properties in Illinois was second only to New Jersey’s for the latest year measured, 2019. For years experts have urged consolidation of governments in Illinois, and for years their imprecations have been resisted.

As in other states that are leaching population, like New

Jersey, many public operatives pile up government work tenures – sometimes overlapping – and earn several pensions, not just one.

Government in Illinois has been a growth industry and its workforce has always had ties extending to the capital of Springfield and its multifarious make-work jobs machinery. That apparatus is built on insiderism and the actual systemic racism of today; the presumed incompetence of minorities to manage their lives without government social service bureaucracies.

Hence the fulsome terminology of ministering to “underserved populations.” It is a “millions served” McDonald’s success metric. As Illinois became an exemplar of statism, actually *solving* problems never mattered.

In the state legislature during Madigan’s long reign, the operating system could not be other than suffused with self-interest, whether naked or finely garbed.

With his piles of campaign cash from connected donors, Madigan financed the legislative election and re-election of Democratic state representatives in districts with contorted boundaries that he and lawyer allies had rigged.

To keep Madigan’s campaign cash flowing their way, Democratic House members had to vote the way he told them. Intra-party debate became stillborn. Madigan’s position largely determined the fate of legislation.

Would-be influencers might also give business to the law firm where Madigan did property tax appeals work; with cases decided by sub-rosa panels of Democratic Party insiders.

The results were often quite successful for Madigan’s well-heeled clients. They could be “touched” for campaign contributions to the Illinois House Democratic campaign apparatus.

Or to contribute to the campaigns of Democratic-majority State Supreme Court justices. The last hard line of defense against real change. Willing to nullify statewide voter-approved mandates for term limits, expanded range for local citizen ballot initiatives, and more.

It was a hermetic, self-sustaining machinery. Artful in its way.

Madigan's expert political bullying was just inside the letter of the law. The Chicago Tribune described in December 2020 how Madigan had used strong-arm tactics that had repulsed even allies, to get his daughter Lisa Madigan elected Illinois Attorney General in 2002.

The paper wrote: "Madigan directed state employees who worked for him to join her campaign apparatus, from secretaries to legislative aides to policy analysts. He pressured his friends in organized labor to endorse her. He set up an old-fashioned phone tree, asking his allies to supply him with guest lists from their weddings, Christmas card lists, church and volunteer groups, names, addresses, and phone numbers."

'He Can Do It In Such A Way That You Wouldn't Even Know'

The Tribune had reported at the time, "'The pressure many of us have gotten is unbelievable,' said the longtime leader of one advocacy group. 'It's more than unbelievable. It's disgusting...(He) is able to mess with your candidates. He can mess with your (legislative) bills. He can do it in such a way that you wouldn't even know.'

"Some labor leaders said they received implicit threats that long-sought legislation would wither if they didn't back Lisa Madigan. 'He knew exactly where to draw the line,' one union leader said of his conversation with Madigan...'I'm not stupid. I know exactly what he meant.' After that endorsement was

secured, legislation sought by the union was called for a House vote and passed," the Tribune wrote.

But finally, the Boss Squirrel's tail got burned by the flame. His charmed life unraveled partially in 2020 as the ComEd scandal came into public view, and then further in March 2022 with his own federal indictment.

Illinois also holds a special place in the annals of governmental corruption. From 1976 through 2019, there were 2,152 corruption convictions in Illinois, second only to Louisiana on a per capita basis. It was an endless parade of rogues, caught in the act. No small cohort of the perps came from Chicago and environs. Time will tell if Madigan joins the ranks. He has finally been nominated to join the club.

I've been inside the city's machinery of corruption, and at a tender age. I first cut my teeth on it in the summer of 1977.

I'm working for the Better Government Association out of the London Guarantee and Accident Building, a grand historic structure at Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive, in the heart of downtown Chicago's high-rent district, across from Tribune Tower, and The Wrigley Building.

I'm soon sent to Chicago's workaday precincts, at the corner of Cicero and Palmer on the Northwest Side to nail a ghost payroller. He's running a hotdog stand all day but drawing a full-time paycheck from the city as a water meter reader. A guy somebody had sent.

First I go in, to make him – surreptitiously matching the face to the name. A day later I'm in a beat-up station wagon half a block away holding below the window line a Nikon with a big telephoto lens. He comes out back to empty the trash and I snap away undetected. Before long he's off the city payroll.

Then comes the BGA-*Chicago Sun Times* "Mirage Tavern" undercover sting. I'm a junior member of the team operating a

drinking establishment at the northwest edge of downtown Chicago. City inspectors shaking us down left and right, like they did so many small businesses. Electrical code violations are spotted, and cash workarounds discussed. Plumbing and building inspectors visit, too.

A photographer in a hidden alcove over the john, silently capturing the hand-offs of the folded newspaper bearing an envelope filled with Jacksons. Heads roll. The next mayor Jane Byrne says going forward the grifters will get no quarter. But cockroaches have a hard shell.

Particularly state legislators and Chicago city council members, called aldermen.

One of the latter, convicted in a federal corruption trial in February 2022, was a Daley. That's the city's famous Irish political clan which yielded two mayors. Two more current aldermen have been indicted and will face trials or plea deals. Experts calculate only one in ten thieving politicians or government workers are ever caught. So Chicago's three out of fifty, might be thirty. Or sixty percent.

Perhaps not – but the real calculus is moral. In two respects.

First, the preoccupation with retaining and in some instances exploiting power obscures any deep work for the greater good. Broken schools, broken courts, tragic city finances? Never mind all that. Free-range squirrels are always at the rotting pumpkin. They may just be steering "community development" grants drawn from taxpayers to nonprofits – as a form of oblique re-election spending.

Second, comes the hypocrisy of the city's now institutionalized culture of race-based grievance. It presumes a hard-set discrimination based on race subverts outcomes for minorities.

A More Ecumenical Insiderism

But the real discrimination is in favor of connected insiders who win contracts, connections, and special preferences of the sort invisible to the untrained eye. This discrimination is practiced by majority bloc Black and Latino politicians – and their dwindling white counterparts – in city, county, and state government.

In Chicago and Illinois, this is the mountain that politicians of color have climbed, in the end. To emulate the old crude – and now somewhat savvy – Irish, Italian, and Polish thieving political bastards.

Call it “social justice.”

Dan Ringo learned the hard way. He was a would-be vendor trying to win a contract from Chicago Public Schools (CPS). I’ll retell the story shared by veteran Chicago journalist Mark Konkol and add some details about the backdrop and the guys to whom Ringo went for help.

What we’ll see is that the political-industrial complex of Illinois is arranged like a stack of Russian nesting dolls.

Ringo was a Black businessman from Detroit who ran a custodial services company. It was a big step up from an early job he’d held in a boiler room. Things were looking good. He had a CPS letter saying the school board was on the verge of approving his company for an \$80 million contract. This would be big. But then the ground shifted. He heard some people were working behind the scenes trying to kill the deal. And get the contract issued to another bidder.

Naturally Ringo wanted to know more. He scored an early 2017 breakfast meeting with the afore-mentioned power broker and one-time ComEd lobbyist John Hooker.

Ringo had been told Hooker could clue him in. That wasn’t the

half of it.

Hooker in November of 2020 would be one of three ComEd lobbyists who along with the ComEd ex-CEO Anne Pramagiorre were indicted by federal prosecutors in the influence scheme I've described here earlier. But all that was three years in the future when Ringo met Hooker for breakfast to talk about the CPS contract that was squirming just out of his grasp.

Hearing Ringo's story, Hooker during the meeting called Frank Clark, a close friend and Black businessman who'd been ComEd's CEO from 2005 to 2012. Clark was president of the CPS board. Like Hooker, Clark was connected.

In fact in 2016 with Hooker, Clark had gone to bat for House Speaker Madigan. They headed a group that with the help of Madigan's lawyers knocked off the statewide ballot a voter initiative that threatened power brokers. If approved, it would have amended the state constitution so an independent commission – not grubby, self-interested politicians – would draw the new state legislative district maps, after each Census. Mapping is an inside game which political parties understand as a central to consolidating power.

But the attorney representing Clark and Hooker's group convinced the Illinois State Supreme Court to prevent a public vote on independent mapping. That was assured by a slim majority vote on the court; all four Democratic justices. As was so often the case when the state's high court waylaid various policy reforms approved by voters or the legislature, this High Court majority bloc was all in for the state's entrenched special interests.

The Supremes voted against allowing voters to decide the independent mapping question.

But just in case the question did go to voters, Clark and Hooker's group had already sent out pre-emptive direct-mail hit pieces.

The mailers said independent mapping would hurt minorities, and help elect Republicans who'd target middle-class families by "taking away their job protections and driving down their wages."

The mailers also ominously said "we will take note of who assists in the destruction" of minority communities.

Always play the race card, right?

So now, back to Dan Ringo's breakfast meeting with one hardball operator across the table from his eggs, and another one on the phone, who headed the Chicago's school system and apparently also its contracting awards.

When Hooker told Clark about Ringo's contracting predicament with CPS and put in a good word for him, Clark, the CPS Board President, asked Hooker about the thing that really counted.

Who did Ringo know, anyway?

And for Dan Ringo the answer was, not anyone with juice.

Several days later Ringo got another letter from CPS. He was now out of the running for that \$80 million custodial services contract. A bigger, three-year version of the contract worth \$168.6 million was awarded to a company owned by former NBA star Magic Johnson.

CPS should have been already working on a sweeping transformation aimed at left-behind Black students. Less than one in five of whom can meet the basic standard of "proficient" in math or reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), "the Nation's Report Card."

But efficacy be damned. Because behind the scenes, top officials were doing what really matters in Chicago, and in Illinois: building their piles of chits higher.

The decades passed and still they asked, "Who sent you?" "Who

do you know?" "Whose guy are you, anyway?" Because it was always about trading favors.

Ethics, policy, outcomes?

Just so many stale breadsticks sitting in a lonely basket on the table of power.

Until March 2, Michael Madigan was still winning; still a very well-fed squirrel. His annual state pension started at \$85,000 and was then to jump smartly to just under \$149,000 by mid-2022.

In Illinois, that's often a happy ending. Not now, though. A long legal battle will ensue, likely including appeals if Madigan is found guilty. Incumbent Democrats may well suffer in the near term, in 2022 contests for Governor and the state legislature. But the state has a high tolerance for corruption particularly among ruling Democrats. After being pardoned by President Trump and sprung from federal detention on his corruption convictions, former Illinois Governor, Democrat Rod Blagojevich, has launched a comeback tour including a Hulu docu-series titled "Being Blago." And a lawsuit which if successful could permit him to again seek public office. In November he was seen fronting a band for one number at a North Side Chicago club called Martyr's, and belting out, "I Shall Be Released."

We like our crooks to be shameless in Illinois. We like slack in the ropes around the ring.

Small wonder that "pay to play" has remained embedded in our state's political source code.

The only way to banish the endemic insiderism of Illinois, including the very sort that federal prosecutors allege against Boss Squirrel Madigan and his underlings, will be for Illinois citizens and the new officeholders they may now elect in November, to rise up and demand ethics and transparency

reforms heretofore unimagined. For Illinoisans – the lot of them either jaundiced or apathetic – it will need to be made crystal clear: what’s really in it for them?

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Matt Rosenberg is the author of [*What Next, Chicago? Notes of a Pissed-Off Native Son.*](#) He also writes at [ChicagoSkooled](#). He has worked in journalism, public affairs, and communications for more than three decades. He lives in Seattle and Chicago. Reach him at chicagoauthor2020s@gmail.com

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