

Corruption in the Land of Lincoln

These should be heady days in Springfield, but state politicians have been jolted by unseemly accusations.

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When the Abraham Lincoln Museum and Library in Springfield opened its doors three years ago, the newly commissioned paintings on display were like Where's Waldo? games for the Illinois political cognoscenti. One painting depicted a celebration of Lee's surrender at Appomattox, but among the celebrants was a woman many recognized as Julie Cellini, the contemporary head of the state agency that funds the museum. Another painting portrayed President Lincoln looking at returns on election night in 1864, while an associate stood over him making a hand gesture and offering advice. To those in the know, the adviser bore a striking resemblance to William Cellini—Julie's husband, and one of modern Illinois's most influential power brokers, political fundraisers and lobbyists.

But in recent days, the image of William Cellini as a Lincoln adviser has become more than a little awkward for the museum. The 74-year-old, long dubbed "the King of Clout," was indicted last month on conspiracy to commit extortion, mail fraud and solicitation of a bribe. He's just the latest casualty in a sweeping, three-year investigation by U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald, a probe that is reinforcing the state's long-held reputation for rank corruption and tawdry politics. (Cellini, through his lawyer, has denied all wrongdoing.)

These should be heady days in Springfield. Barack Obama launched his presidential campaign on the steps of the state capitol. His Inauguration on Jan. 20 as the fourth president with Illinois roots (Ulysses S. Grant lived in the state and Ronald Reagan was born there) will come just a few weeks before the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth—an event state officials have been planning for years. But just as Illinois politicians gear up for the celebrations, which include a gala black-tie birthday party on Feb. 12, they've been jolted anew by allegations of kickbacks, shakedowns and influence peddling.

A prime focus of Fitzgerald's probe, code-named Operation Board Games, is the state's Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich, a temperamental onetime reformer from Chicago who now has a lower approval rating (13 percent) than President Bush. He is referred to in the latest indictment as "Public Official A"—the intended beneficiary of campaign contributions that Cellini and his accused co-conspirators, including convicted political "fixer" Antoin (Tony) Rezko, allegedly sought from a Chicago businessman turned Hollywood producer seeking state business. Fitzgerald has denounced the practices uncovered by Operation Board Games as part of a "pay-to-play scheme on steroids," in which businesses were brashly hit up for campaign funds in exchange for state contracts and appointments to state boards. Stuart Levine, another of Cellini's alleged co-conspirators, who raised huge sums for Blagojevich and got reappointed to two state boards, testified at Rezko's trial that the governor once told him during a 2003 plane ride, "You stick with us and you'll do very well for yourself." (Levine has pleaded guilty and is cooperating in Fitzgerald's probe; Rezko is seeking his own deal.)

Blagojevich has not been charged, and his office has adamantly denied any wrongdoing. "The governor was not involved in the improper activities alleged in the indictment," his spokesman, Lucio Guerrero, said after the charges against Cellini were filed. Pressure continues to build, however. In just the past few weeks, new subpoenas went out for records relating to a health-care company that won a favorable state ruling after hiring a former aide to the governor as its lobbyist. "They are continuing to work their way up the ladder," says one lawyer close to the case who asked not to be identified talking about the ongoing probe.

The Board Games investigation follows an earlier Fitzgerald dirt-digging effort that culminated two years ago in the conviction of Blagojevich's Republican predecessor, George Ryan, on 18 felony counts. Kent Redfield, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois in Springfield, notes that three of the state's last seven elected governors have gone to prison—a gubernatorial incarceration rate unequalled in the country. Even while producing towering figures like Lincoln and Adlai Stevenson, "there has always been a 'Let's make a deal' and 'Where's mine?' kind of politics that is pretty pervasive in the culture of Illinois," Redfield says.

Although Blagojevich was the first governor to back Obama, and will appoint his successor in the Senate, he's now keeping a low profile. The governor's spokesman, Guerrero, tells NEWSWEEK that it "hasn't been decided yet" whether Blagojevich will even attend the Inauguration in January. But that doesn't mean there isn't still state business to conduct. In the days before the election, the governor had to figure out what to do with Richard E. Beard, the \$200,000-a-year executive director of the Lincoln Library and Museum. Beard had just been arrested shoplifting a DVD box set of the TV show "House" from a local Target. (He has pleaded not guilty; Target also identified him as having previously walked off with a box set of "Seinfeld" DVDs.) And as it turned out, he was convicted last year of stealing neckties from Macy's. Blagojevich fired him—an executive decision to restore integrity in the land of Lincoln.