

POLITICO

Illinois' culture of reform inspired by Simon

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December 16, 2008 04:45 AM EST

If Illinois politics has been a hotbed for corruption, it has also benefited from a culture of reform, a meme stream that flows directly to President-elect Barack Obama from the late Sen. Paul Simon, through generations of journalists and politicians Simon has inspired.

Like most everything in life, politics is physics. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. And the patronage, vote-buying and bribes that were hallmarks of the Cook County Democratic machine and the corruption in Springfield stimulated a Progressive Era-inspired reform movement led by a young weekly editor and future state legislator, lieutenant governor, U.S. representative and U.S. senator.

Among those whom Simon has mentored and influenced have been Obama himself, plus two of his inner circle: Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.), a Simon protégé, and Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, a former Chicago Tribune political writer who was press secretary for Simon's first U.S. Senate campaign in 1984.

The bow-tied senator began battling corruption in 1948, at the age of 19, when he dropped out of Dana College in Blair, Neb., to buy a failing Southern Illinois weekly newspaper, the Troy Tribune, with a \$3,000 loan from the local Lions Club. It was the same year Illinois elected the blue-ribbon reform ticket of Adlai Stevenson for governor and Paul H. Douglas for the U.S. Senate. Holding the Senate seat to which Simon was eventually elected in 1984 and to which Durbin ascended after Simon's retirement in 1996, Douglas, known as the conscience of the Senate, became a close friend and mentor to Simon in the 1950s and 1960s.

Simon used his weekly to challenge organized crime and the local Democratic machine in Madison County, across the river from St. Louis. His crusade drew the attention of Stevenson and the Kefauver Committee on organized crime in the U.S. Senate, before which Simon testified in 1951. Simon's profile as a crusading editor helped launch a 40-year political career when he was elected, at the age of 25, to the Illinois House of Representatives, defeating the Madison County Democratic machine candidate.

He aligned himself in the Legislature with anti-machine "lakeshore liberals," (a reference to Lake Michigan), including then-State Rep. Abner Mikva, who, like Simon, mentored Obama and encouraged his run for the U.S. Senate. Simon was just about to endorse Obama for the 2004 nomination when he died on Dec. 9, 2003, of complications from heart surgery.

Obama acknowledged Simon's role as a mentor in an interview with PBS's Gwen Ifill after his keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: "Dick Durbin, I think, [in his introduction of Obama] appropriately mentioned Paul Simon as somebody who was a mentor to me, and one of the things that he always talked about is being able to disagree without being disagreeable. ..."

As a young state representative, Simon authored Illinois' first open meeting law, guaranteeing press and public access to official proceedings. In 1963, he blew the whistle on corruption in the Legislature in a piece for Harper's magazine, for which his colleagues "jokingly" gave him their Benedict Arnold Award.

In 1968, Simon was elected lieutenant governor. He selected as his legal counsel a recent graduate of Georgetown Law School, Durbin, who had been an intern in Paul Douglas' Senate office when he was a law student.

I began my own association with Simon in 1968, when I chaired his student support group at the University of Illinois. After five years as a newspaper reporter and then press secretary to the Democrats in the Illinois House, I became Simon's first U.S. House campaign press secretary in 1974 and then his press spokesman in Washington. One of my duties was to prepare and release his annual statement of personal income, assets and liabilities, which he voluntarily provided for every one of his 40 years in office. He required similar statements from his principal staff — including this 28-year-old in 1975, when I was earning a paltry \$18,000 (Paul was a frugal employer) and my net worth was deep in the embarrassingly negative range.

After the recent disclosures about Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, I heard a TV talking head refer to Obama as a “product of the Cook County Democratic machine.” That cable-babbler got it exactly wrong. Political geography was definitely not destiny for the new president. His political lineage winds its way back through Axelrod, Durbin, Mikva and others to the man who inspired many of us to public service and progressive journalism.

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