



# Ryan comedown takes Thompson too

November 08, 2007 | By Eric Zorn



Another former governor of Illinois stands disgraced today.

I don't mean George Ryan (though him, too, of course), but Big Jim Thompson, the rock-star federal prosecutor of the 1970s who went on to become our state's longest-serving chief executive. He was held in such esteem after voluntarily stepping down nearly 17 years ago that officials renamed the spectacular State of Illinois Building in the Loop in his honor.

Yet now, a new generation knows Thompson best as the chief defender and supporter of a man who personifies the cozy and crooked way politics is too often practiced in Illinois.

And here I do mean George Ryan.

Ryan was one of Thompson's former lieutenant governors, and when Ryan was indicted on corruption charges in late 2003, Thompson, then chairman of the Winston & Strawn law firm, arranged for Ryan to have a free defense worth an estimated \$20 million.

Thompson kept a low profile during Ryan's trial, but after Ryan was convicted in April 2006, Thompson became the main spokesman for the appeal effort, arguing in written motions and to reporters that Ryan didn't get a fair trial and underscoring the view that the conviction was a "travesty."

On Wednesday, then, Thompson and his wife accompanied Ryan, his wife and other family members on Ryan's ride to the federal prison camp near Oxford, Wis., where he began serving a 6 1/2 -year sentence.

Yes, Thompson was one of Ryan's lawyers, and lawyers should act and speak forcefully on behalf of their clients. There's no shame in that.

And yes, Thompson is a friend and former close professional and political associate of Ryan's, and friends should provide support in times of trouble and need. There's no shame in that, either.

But Thompson is not an ordinary lawyer, nor is he an ordinary friend.

He's an elder statesman. The dignity and respect of the office of governor of Illinois are both his burden and his advantage in life, no matter what positions he goes on to hold.

OK, I'll pause now so you can catch your breath after choking on the idea that the office of governor of Illinois is dignified and respectful. Three of its last seven former occupants have ended up in prison, after all, and the current governor is less popular than staph infections.

But. Still. What's seemly for a defense lawyer -- even a former local U.S. attorney -- and for a good buddy is, here, unseemly for a former governor.

Thompson owed it to the office he once held to keep the sort of serene distance from Ryan's troubles that has been kept by ex-Gov. Jim Edgar, the fellow Republican who served in the eight years between Thompson and Ryan.

And Thompson owed it to his record as a corruption-buster -- a record that launched his wildly successful political career that, in turn, launched his wildly lucrative legal career -- not to come out so publicly for a politician accused and then convicted of just the sort of official misdeeds he once crusaded against.

"Jim Thompson is a gigantic figure in state history," said Jay Stewart, executive director of the Better Government Association. "But this full-throated defense of George Ryan and his crimes is tattering his reputation around the edges."

It also, inevitably, touches off unsubstantiated and unfair speculation that Thompson is trying to protect old secrets of his own by staying on Ryan's good side.

Stewart said he doubts that, and so do I. More likely, in my view, is the assessment of Paul Green, director of Roosevelt University's School of Public Policy Studies:

"Thompson just doesn't give a damn how this looks," Green said. "He's done his service. His record of being elected four times in a row will never be broken. He's 71 years old, and he's going to stick by his friend."

I offered to Green my view that this misguided display of loyalty has deeply tarnished Thompson's legacy.

"If this were a state like Wisconsin, I'd say yes, absolutely," chirped Green. "But this is Illinois, remember. The bar here is very low."

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