About two months ago the New Yorker ran an amusing piece on how Barak Obama grew and flourished in the sometimes corrupt machine politics of Chicago and the Illinois legislature. The article reminded me of my own observation of the Illinois government 60 years ago.

In the fall of 1944 in my home town, Springfield, Ill., I was looking for a job. Someone suggested the Illinois legislature and put me in touch with Don Chamberlain, head of United Press in Illinois and head of the Illinois Legislative Correspondents Association. And so, when the Illinois legislature began its 6-month session in 1945 I found myself House Press Secretary, paid by the Republican Speaker of the House but beholden to the newspaper people.

After telling me my duties for the newspapermen, Mr. Chamberlain went on to tell me the sources of graft that went with my job – “graft” was the word he used. My principal graft source would be, he said, to shake down the lobbyists who were eager for the information that I would be distributing free to the newspaper people and to several other privileged individuals.

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There were then five daily newspapers in Chicago which sent ten or twelve of their best reporters to cover the Illinois state government – all men. Reporters for Associated Press, United Press, Hearst’s International News Service, and the two Springfield newspapers made a total of about seventeen reporters. (Only two unimportant ones were women.) They exercised great power in Springfield because the politicians knew that the way that newspapers reported them and their policies would determine the public perception of them. This was before television, radio news was insignificant and print journalism was virtually the sole news medium. When a journalist discovered that a politician had committed some malfeasance, the journalist would usually use his discovery as a tool to extort the politician’s cooperation on other matters.
Political leaders did all they could to keep on the newspaper people’s good side. While I was working in the Capitol I think it was Secretary of State’s money that remodeled an obscure corner of the Capitol Building – the 1868 Building is full of odd corners – into a place of refuge and relaxation for the press. From the 3rd floor rotunda an unmarked door led into a drab corridor where telegraph operators worked the leased telegraph wires that led direct to Chicago newspapers. Beyond a further door was a comfortable room with desks, new typewriters, and copious office supplies. Beyond that was an elegant lounge with corner windows that looked down on the Capitol lawn with its statues. A large panel could slide back revealing a bar -- manned by a black bartender paid by the Lieutenant Governor’s office. We had endless quantities of Dick’s Beer donated by Senator Dick, who owned a brewery – awful stuff, as I remember. And many cases of the best hard liquor, gifts of various politicians. When the legislature had an evening session and the bartender went home, the newspapermen laughingly required ME to mix their drinks – and, if I made a mistake, to drink it myself.

I’ll not take time to tell you all of the services I provided for the newspapers. Early in the legislative session some 50 or 100 bills -- proposed laws -- were introduced every day. A skilled ex-newspaperman named Rieffler thumbed through them, hurriedly dictated to me what each bill would do – I was typing direct on a mimeograph stencil – and in a few minutes I was hurrying through the building passing mimeographed sheets to those authorized to receive them. Later in the session I was passing out lists of forthcoming committee meetings and what bills each committee was expecting to consider. As the bills were officially printed, I provided copies to each newspaperman. Much of this material I delivered daily to the hotels where the journalists stayed. Most of them stayed at the Republican hotel, although reporters of Democratic newspaper – the *Chicago Sun* - - stayed at the Democratic hotel. Some of my material I also delivered gratis to the officers of the Senate and House, such as Richard J. Daley (senior), who was then leader of the Democrats in the Senate and who succeeded Ed Kelly as mayor of Chicago, and to Paul Powell, Democratic leader in the House. This was the material that lobbyists were eager for.

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Then, as now, the two houses of the legislature contained various factions as well as some individual legislators who were relatively independent of any faction.

There was, for instance, the little feminist block. Lottie Holman O’Neil had been one of the original woman suffragists who attained the right to vote in 1920 and then reorganized themselves as the League of Women Voters. She had represented Downers Grove in the legislature since 1922. Her friend the ladylike Mrs.Van Der Vries was from a wealthier Chicago suburb.

They often worked in cooperation with the prohibitionist block representing the Women’s Christian Temperance Union – its national headquarters is still in Evanston – and with devout Methodists and Baptists from southern Illinois who opposed liquor and other vices. Rev. R. D. Dexheimer, head of the Anti-Saloon League, eventually asked me to help him put on a dinner for the newspaper people and I persuaded them to actually come to it, although they arrived roaring drunk.
Such interests groups as the insurance industry were represented in the legislature. It was said that Representative Thon, a blank-looking old man with thick glasses, was the only person in the state who truly understood the state insurance code.

Several legislators – not all of them Democrats – worked closely with labor union lobbyists – the A. F. of L., the C. I. O., and Walter Reuther’s United Auto Workers.

And there were the Chicago politicians whom the newspapermen called “the money boys.” Most but not all of them were Democrats – Mr. Weber, whose brother had been recently shot in a gangland slaying; Mr. Marzulo, Mr. Euzzino, Mr. Zeman (who looked abysmally stupid), and Kuklinski, Prusinsky, and Krusniewski. Also a few Republicans, such as Jimmy Aducci. In the House of Representatives the floor leader of the money boys was Pete Granata, a Republican who gave Chicago Mayor Ed Kelley exactly what he wanted and otherwise pursued his own interests. He and D’Arco came from the notorious “River Wards” where long-dead bodies continued to vote. In the state Senate the “money boys” were led by the charming and colorful Senator Roland Libonati, whose brother was Americanism chairman of the American Legion. I wish I had time to tell you about the magnificent Italian dinner that Senator Libonati put on for the press – including me -- in an apartment on the second floor above a sleazy bar.

Here’s an example of how the “money boys” operated. I think it was Jimmy Aducci who introduced into the House of Representatives a bill to amend the law that licenses and regulates places that have liquor licenses. His proposal would require that each restaurant and bar serving alcoholic drinks must have a large plate glass window facing the street. Also, its interior must be brightly lighted so that passers-by on the street can look through the big window and see exactly what is going on inside. With support from Lottie Holman O’Neil’s friends and Rev. Dexheimer’s Methodists and Baptists, it slowly made its way through House committees.

This proposal seemed preposterous, so I asked my friends what was going on. “It’s a money bill,” I was told. The “money boys” wanted to shake down the bar owners’ association. Apparently the bar owners did not come up with enough money, for the state House of Representatives finally passed the measure. A month or two later in the Senate, when Senator Libonati rose to ask that this bill be set aside, we knew that the bar owners had finally coughed up enough money.

The “money boys” were by no means all business, however. Let me tell you about the “Cat Bill.” Pete Granata and his friends took under their wing Miss Gertrude Charnley, a wealthy and slightly crazy lady from Oak Park who called herself “Friends of Birds, Inc.” Miss Charnley lobbied for a bill to prevent birds from being killed by cats. She wanted every cat in the state to be kept on a leash by its owner and every stray cat to be collected and kept in a local “cattery.” Miss Charnley was a fanatically persuasive lobbyist and got some independent legislators to support her “Cat Bill” but her main support was from Granata’s gang, who shouted “meow” with great hilarity as they voted for it. In that year – 1945 – her bill was voted down in the House and Miss Charnley sat in the House balcony in tears. In the next legislative session, 1947, the “cat bill” passed the House amid catcalls and vast hilarity. But it was defeated in the Senate, among such respected figures as Senator Barr, who had Represented Joliet in the state Senate since 1902, denounced the proposal as a ridiculous waste of time.
In 1949, however, Miss Charnley and Libonati and his friends somehow persuaded the Senate to pass the thing. Governor Adlai Stevenson’s veto message – you remember the gracious and eloquent Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, Democratic candidate for president in 1952 and 1956 – Stevenson’s veto message was a masterpiece of very gentle whimsy. Much as we are all friends of birds, he wrote, we must realize that cats too have natural and civil liberties that deserve to be respected.

Miss Charnley was devastated. A year or two later, after I had moved to California, I read in the Los Angeles Times that a bill for the protection of birds had been introduced in the California State Assembly at Sacramento with the support of “Friends of Birds, Inc.,” of Santa Barbara. I sent this information to my Aunt Alice, who told Governor Stevenson, who asked me to keep him posted.

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When I worked for the legislature I had very little interaction with Representative Orville Hodge, a Republican from a St. Louis suburb. He never made a speech, he always voted with the Republican organization, he was inconspicuous, he caused no trouble. I always thought he was stupid as well as dull. My Aunt Alice insisted he was very nice; he had even invited her to let him fly her down to Florida in his private jet and to spend a few days in the hotel that he owned there. She regretted that she could not accept his gracious invitation.

A year or two later Mr. Hodge was elected State Auditor. The job of the State Auditor, I think, is to prevent the State Treasurer from stealing the treasury. Mr. Hodges stole over $6 million dollars, then persuaded the legislature that his department was broke so it gave him a $525,000 emergency appropriation and he stole that too. When they finally caught up with him he immediately pleaded guilty, which meant a trial so speedy and brief that he was never asked to testify. He went to a comfortable middle-class jail, got lots of time off for very good behavior, in due course was released from jail – and still had his $6,525,000 because no one had ever asked him where it was. I think he went back to Florida.

A moment ago I mentioned Paul Powell, whom I knew as leader of the Democrats in the House of Representatives. He afterwards was elected Secretary of State. He was exuberant and colorful, a good old boy from extreme southern Illinois. That region is called “Egypt” because its chief town is Cairo (pronounced like the corn syrup – “Kay-row.”) Mr. Powell’s home was in the hamlet of Vienna – (the locals pronounce it “Vie-Anna”) but he was a political power in the whole region – especially after he became Secretary of State. I’ve read that even in Belvedere, normally a Republican town, if you applied for a driver’s license in those years then you had to make out a check not to the Department of Motor Vehicles but to Paul Powell.

As a legislator and as Secretary of State Powell provided generous pork for his region. For instance, he sent vast sums of money to Southern Illinois University and installed his best friend as its provost. The house that the state built for the provost cost millions and millions.
Powell finally died in 1971. The day after his funeral his best friend (the provost of S. I. U.) and Powell’s “secretary”/girlfriend were going though his hotel room at the Democratic hotel in Springfield. In his closet they found shoeboxes full of cash, plus briefcases and a metal box full of cash – about $800,000 total. The provost and the girlfriend told no one. But after several months the rumor somehow leaked out and circulated first, naturally, at the bar in the Democrats’ hotel. Asked why they had kept their discovery a secret, they replied that they were looking for more money.

My own comment: You darn right they were looking for more money and they would have kept that too if they could have managed to keep it secret.

U. S. Senator Adlai Stevenson III intoned: “No one can fill his shoeboxes.”

Where did all that cash come from? I asked around, was told that some of it came from tire companies – the State of Illinois uses lots of tires – and some of it came from the Teamsters Union. I have no idea what their angle was.

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The newspaper people liked my work and wanted to find me a state job to keep me available between the 1945 session of the legislature and coming 1947 session. So my mentor Don Chamberlain, head of the Legislative Correspondents Association, wrote to the governor’s office to give this young man a job.

Thus I found myself employed as a clerk for the Illinois State Police, keeping the state headquarters office open between 4 p.m. and midnight six evenings a week – Tuesdays off. When I was issued my uniform the Department of Public Safety was changing uniform colors so my pants were gray and my top was brown. I didn’t care if they didn’t care.

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I quickly learned that we were all Republicans at the Illinois State Police.

The Director of the Department of Public Safety was Mr. Sullivan, an influential Chicago attorney who had made generous donations to the Republican party. I never saw Mr. Sullivan, although one night about 10 p.m. he telephoned me and said “There’s a skunk under my house – get him out!”

The Captain of our district was Mr. Sullivan’s son-in-law, Captain O’Connor. An incompetent idiot, he had the good sense to stay in his office and keep out of the way.

The Lieutenant of our district was Lieutenant Stuper – S-T-U-P-E-R – who had been Mr. Sullivan’s milkman and who had somehow persuaded Mr. Sullivan of his potential as a police officer. Indeed, Lieutenant Stuper was the most intelligent person in the place and whatever detective work we did was done by him. He knew nothing about what is now called police science – none of us did – but he was painfully conscientious and to improve his marksmanship he spent every Sunday with his pistol at the city dump shooting rats.
The three sergeants in our district were Republican precinct committeemen who were being rewarded for having produced noteworthy Republican majorities in their neighborhoods. Their shifts rotated. When Sgt. Metzger was on my evening shift he went to his girlfriend’s apartment and I telephoned him there whenever anything happened that required his presence – the skunk under Mr. Sullivan’s house, for instance.

About half of our police officers were also Republican precinct committeemen. One of my favorites was jolly Officer Bolinger, a sausage-maker by trade. Other officers had been given their jobs through the patronage system. Everyone in the place had a political “sponsor” and several of us – officers and clerks -- gave our sponsors a slice of our paychecks every month. When anyone asked me who my sponsor was, I smiled and said “The governor’s office.”

The chief clerk of our district office was Eddie Balisky, an affable drunk who was the nephew of Mr. Yates, the Republican County Central Committee chairman. Every time there was an election – an average of twice a year – each of us gave Eddie half of our month’s salary in cash. Eddie put all the money in a sack and carried it to his uncle to buy votes with. So far as I could tell, in our city the Democrats and the Republicans bought about the same number of votes and elections were sometimes decided on their merits.

You might want to ask – did our Republican state police do their job competently? I’ll reply: we weren’t bad. The main duty of our officers was to patrol the highways. Our cops, thinking like Republican partisans, believed that the driving public would view Republicans favorably if we did a good job. Our cops were so polite that it was a pleasure and an honor to be given a speeding ticket by one of our officers.

My only complaint regarded wrecking trucks. After many of the highway accidents we needed a wrecker to clear the highway. I had been given a list of Republican wreckers to call in rotation. One or two of them were incompetent. They would go out to the accident site with their truck and screw around indecisively and it would be far too long before highway traffic got moving again. I asked Lieutenant Stuper we could delete from my list the Republican wreckers who were bad. I was told that this was not possible.

After I left my friends on the police and returned to serve in the 1947 session of the legislature, I earned and saved as much money as I could, because I had been admitted to the University of Chicago. I sold information to Mr. Gordon, of the Illinois Manufacturers Association, and also to a rival lobbyist who paid me to give nothing to Gordon. I also worked nights as a reporter for the local Republican newspaper. Ours was a morning newspaper, so I worked at the newspaper office until about midnight and caught the last bus home. Then the following morning at 8:30 or 9 a.m. I was staggering around the state Capitol building doing what had to be done.

The editor of our newspaper was Mr. J. Emil Smith, formerly mayor of our city, a grave, remote figure who sometimes stalked through the city room while we were writing the
newspaper under the supervision of the city editor and the managing editor. My aunt felt pleased that I was working for Mr. Smith because he and his wife were such lovely people.

On nights when the legislature would not meet again for a few days I indulged myself by riding around until very late with our police reporter. He pointed out the numerous houses of prostitution operating busily. Our newspaper never mentioned those. A house was raided by the police only if it had paid off the wrong candidate at election time and then perhaps we might report the police raid.

Gambling was very public in Springfield. I had noticed that the restaurant where many leading citizens lunched – I sometimes ate there too because the food was good and the prices were low – had a room at the rear where horse racing results were posted on the blackboard and men sat playing cards.

The police reporter told me that our sanctimonious editor, Mr. Smith received a payoff consisting of 25% of the profits from one type of gambling – the punchboards that were ubiquitous in bars and lower-class restaurants. Every punchboard, I learned, had on its bottom a stamp from the Syndicate. A bar or restaurant was raided by the police only if it displayed punchboards that did not carry the Syndicate stamp.

Our police reporter dealt with small day-to-day crime – burglaries, the occasional assault, the very occasional murder. He knew that the police had their own little fiddles, which of course he never mentioned in print. Once or twice the Police Department had become angry at him and refused to give him information he needed about the cases that he could write about. We retaliated. We would print a short newspaper item that was totally false – that a woman had reported being troubled by a sex fiend. (That was the word we used – “sex fiend.”) The next day a dozen women were on the phone telling us that the sex fiend was after them – so we printed a piece about their complaints that was wholly true. The next day there were so many complaints that we could headline “City invaded by sex fiends.” Soon our editorials demanded that the Mayor force the Police Chief to save our fair community from sex fiends. Public excitement rose until finally the police station began to give our police reporter the information he needed. For a few days our phone continued to ring with reports about sex fiends, but we printed nothing further about the matter and after a few weeks it was forgotten.

Ever since then, when I reflect on the vital importance of the work that newspapers and journalists do, I ask myself – how can we estimate what newspapers and the other media are NOT telling us?