

by Scott P. Richert

## We Are All Socialists Now

Rockford has long been a Republican city, which is not surprising considering that industry—at least through the 1980's and, to a lesser extent, even now—has formed the basis of her economy. Today, however, Rockford is becoming increasingly Democratic. I do not necessarily mean that Democrats have begun to dominate city politics. Even though the mayorship is in its third decade of Democratic control, the city council is still fairly evenly divided, and the last two Democratic mayors, John McNamara and Charles Box, often acted like Republicans—at least in terms of their unabashed support for developers and development. (Our current mayor, Doug Scott, has more traditional Democratic concerns, which is not necessarily a bad thing. For instance, he seems more focused on Rockford's struggling downtown than on her "thriving" East State Street corridor of big-box stores and chain restaurants.)

Nor am I referring to Rockfordians voting for Democratic candidates for state office, a phenomenon that had more to do, in this election, with current Republican Governor George Ryan's complete betrayal of his constituency than with party identity. In an election dominated by the Republican Party nationwide, the states of the Upper Midwest—particularly Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin—have returned to Democratic control, and national Republican strategists are already talking about writing off these states—the stronghold of the Reagan Democrats of yore—in 2004. In Illinois, only one Republican candidate for statewide office, incumbent Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka, triumphed. And Republican Winnebago County Board Chairman Kris Cohn—since the election is over, she can drop the "O'Rourke" again—lost her home city by a two-to-one margin, almost the same margin by which she lost the state.

Rockford's increasingly Democratic nature is more a matter of attitude than of party identity. Six years ago, when The Rockford Institute first became involved in the fight against the judicial takeover of the school district, our call for a return to local control seemed to resonate among Rockfordians. A few months later, a rather

conservative Republican candidate for mayor, Timothy Simms, almost defeated incumbent Democrat Charles Box. That fall, voters turned the school board over to a majority who had campaigned on ending federal control, slashing out-of-control spending, and reducing one of the highest property-tax rates in the country.

While candidates and columnists were beating the drums for local control, it became clear that voters and activists were engaged in a tax revolt. Their hopes were dashed when the school-board majority caved in to judicial taxation and put up only a halfhearted fight against overspending, opting instead to try to end the lawsuit quickly. They succeeded, and, as of last June, federal control came to an end; but they lost the board majority in the process, largely because their own repeated requests for additional taxes left their supporters dispirited.

Which brings us to the recent election, when Rockford voters approved the fourth school-district referendum in a row, as well as a one-cent sales-tax increase to build an elaborate \$132-million county jail in the heart of downtown Rockford. Such referenda, it might be argued, are the very essence of local control, though only if you believe in popular democracy rather than representative government. But "What kind of person votes to raise his own taxes?" as my colleague Christopher Check asked, the day after the election. Actually, there are two answers: first, the person who doesn't expect to pay those taxes—the non-property-owner or the welfare recipient, for instance; and second, the person who has decided that he's tired of taking any personal responsibility for his community's problems. Both groups, unfortunately, are on the increase in Rockford and across the country. Certainly, the rapid transformation of the fabled "soccer mom" vote from Republican to Democratic (particularly noticeable in the Chicago suburbs) is an indication of the rise of the second group.

In the weeks before the election, I heard numerous people express their concern that, if the sales-tax increase did not pass, the Winnebago County Board would raise our property taxes instead. They



had good reason to believe that this would be the case: When the referendum was first announced, county officials declared that the jail would be built even if the sales tax did not pass. But think about the logic at work in the minds of these people, most of whom have never voted for a Democratic candidate: Far better to vote for a sales-tax increase, which will be at least partially shouldered by visitors to Rockford, than to risk even the possibility of a property-tax increase, which we would have to bear on our own.

I understand the temptation. But if Winnebago County needs a new 1,200-bed jail to house an average daily population of 560 (a proposition that has not been proved), then who, in fact, should pay for it? Outsiders, who receive no real benefit from it, or the citizens of Rockford and Winnebago County, whose property will presumably be more secure with fewer criminals on the streets? To the extent that a sales-tax increase does shift some of the burden onto visitors, isn't that really just another form of welfare?

Before any type of tax increase was passed, there should have been a vigorous, honest, public debate about the need for a new jail and about possible alternatives. (For instance, only about 180 of the average daily population of 560 really needs to be there; the rest are largely awaiting release on bond). But that would have required a certain level of civic commitment, a willingness to get involved in a fight that might not be won. Better to throw some money at our elected officials in the vain hope that they will make the problem go away. Better still if we can take at least some of that money out of someone else's pocket. We are all socialists now. <c



## Letter From Nauvoo

by Thomas Fleming

### Inside the Court of the Gentiles



Tolstoy once referred to Mormonism as “the American religion.” I only know that because one of my former assistants, a Mormon himself, used to quote the statement as corroboration of the Mormons’ belief that they are quintessentially American. Despite all of his proselytizing efforts and the gift of a *Book of Mormon*, I took no interest in a church that could offer neither literature and philosophy nor brandy and cigars. He did, however, pique my curiosity about the first major Mormon capital, Nauvoo, Illinois, and although I did not make it to Nauvoo during the brief period in June when the newly rebuilt temple was open to the public, I decided to make Nauvoo the centerpiece of my first sightseeing adventure in the state in which I have lived for 18 years. “See Illinois and die,” I told my wife. (Or *vice versa*, I thought to myself, if you have been bad.)

Like most of the middle Middle West, Illinois is (in Taki’s phrase) “corny and flat as a pancake.” The drive down interstate highways from Rockford to Galesburg, where we were leaving cookies, clean clothes, and a younger sister with our son at Knox College, is entirely without interest. The beauty of the prairie has been destroyed, and the marks left by man on the landscape are worse than vandalism. The Midwestern farmer, judging from the look of his property, must hate nature and beauty both. The little groves of trees planted near the farmhouses, perhaps at some lonely farmwife’s request, are the only sign that there might be more to life in the country than corn-shock-stubbed deserts and high-voltage wires.

To the east of Galesburg are the upper reaches of the Spoon River, where Knox College maintains a beautiful patch of prairie edged by hardwoods. This stretch is considerably north of Lewiston and Petersburg, the setting of Edgar Lee Masters’ poems, but Masters himself spent a

year as a student at Knox, and a room in the library memorializes the poet.

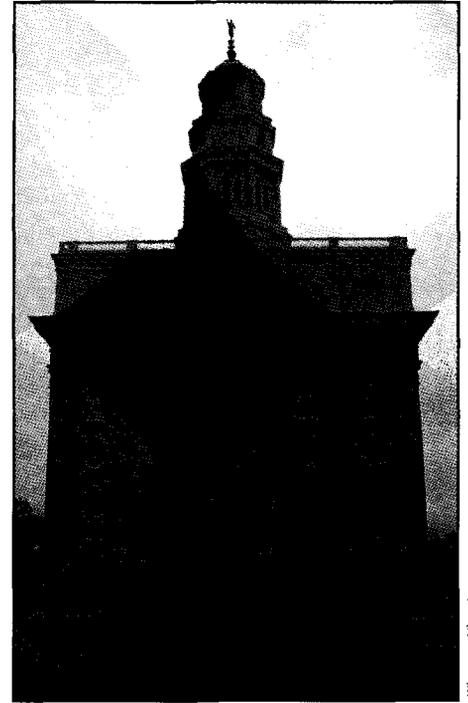
We were in a hurry to be on our way, and, without staying for lunch (the filial apartment was no place in which to eat), we set out on Illinois 41, heading south. That decision proved to be a mistake. There may be good local eateries, but, from what we could see, the local cuisine is determined by the Casey’s General Store chain and Hardee’s. In a fly-ridden Hardee’s in Bushnell, we tried the award-winning “Six Dollar Burger for only \$3.95,” oozing mayo and dripping with a dressing that was as French—and as unconvincing—as a teenager’s French kiss.

We picked up U.S. 136 just south of Bushnell and headed for Carthage. Just before crossing the Hancock County line, we entered a different world. The landscape began to swell and sprout hardwood trees. We felt the distant pull of the Mississippi on the countryside. This Carthage was not the birthplace of the man who swore eternal enmity to Rome but the death place of Joseph Smith, Jr., the Mormon prophet who had set up, with a generous charter from Illinois, the virtually independent community of Nauvoo. Depending upon what you read, Smith was either an inspired prophet or a career con man, a wise and benevolent statesman envied and murdered by the “gentiles” or a fanatic who plotted treason and insurrection against Illinois and the United States.

Although Mormons were never very popular wherever they went, serious trouble started when Nauvoo refused to allow state warrants to be served. Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested on somewhat exaggerated charges of treason and taken into custody in Carthage, where a mob stormed the jail and shot Smith and his brother to death.

We made a brief stop at the Kibbe Museum—a charming assortment of local kitsch that derived from a spinster professor’s personal collection of junk. The warmhearted volunteers were very helpful and told us that, before the temple opened in Nauvoo, they used to get about 1,000 visitors per year. This past summer, however, they were averaging 300 to 600 per day.

The volunteers directed us across the street to the world-famous jail. At the first of the Mormon visitors’ centers, we heard



Thomas Fleming

*The reconstructed Mormon temple*

the refrain that would be repeated all day: *The tour starting in five minutes is booked up, but in an hour, there will be another tour.* I do not like tours, especially when they are conducted by eager missionaries. At two times in my life, I have been “missionized” by the Mormons, and two doses of that vaccine were sufficient to confer immunity. Sidling away from the greeters, we were asked the inevitable “Where you folks from?”; when one of the visitors heard “Rockford,” she told us there was a Rockford lady in the rest room. We preferred not to wait for our Mormon compatriot and eased our way out, but my resourceful wife poked her nose into the jail, dragging along her husband hobbling on his broken ankle.

We were soon accosted by a tour guide with two women in tow. “Are you the folks from Rockford?” she asked. Hearing an affirmative, she explained that she was leading a “personal tour” and seemed to expect us to follow. As we heard her tell the tale of the martyred Smith, it began to dawn on me that we were getting a special tour under false pretenses: She must have confused us with the Mormon lady who was probably still in the rest room, recovering, perhaps, from her Six Dollar Burger. The guide told us what was to me the familiar version of the tale,