

“Sir Galahad & the Pols”

January 28, 1952

***Time* magazine cover story about Adlai Stevenson II, January 28, 1952 issue**

Excerpt:

If Lincoln Steffens* was right, corruption is the norm of U.S. political life; in spite of reform, the pols always come back; the Sir Galahads, sooner or later, get licked, or get laughed out of court, or join the gang. But men like Adlai Stevenson have dedicated themselves to a more hopeful and more dynamic proposition: that the U.S. is not a static pattern but a still-continuing experiment—an experiment, among other things, in good government.

*Steffens was an early twentieth-century muckraking journalist.

Background:

Although this *Time* magazine cover story ran six months prior to the Democratic National Convention, it was a clear indication that party leaders, including President Harry S. Truman, were increasingly interested in Stevenson and his political future.

One week before this article appeared on newsstands, Truman invited Stevenson to the White House for a private meeting. At that time, both Truman and Stevenson remained tightlipped—at least publicly—about their near-term political aspirations. It wasn't until losing the March 10 New Hampshire primary to Tennessee Sen. Estes Kefauver that Truman formally announced he would not seek reelection. Stevenson, on the other hand, did not participate in the Democratic primaries, and only received his party's nomination after being “drafted” during the August convention. Regardless, Truman used the January White House meeting with Stevenson to gauge the political strengths and weaknesses of the Illinois governor.

As this article shows, it was Stevenson's single term as Illinois governor that made him a national figure. Elected governor in 1948, he earned a reputation as a reformer during his four years in Springfield, and his rise in national standing coincided with the decline of Truman's political fortunes.

Stevenson, a pragmatic, good-government Democrat, faced many challenges in Springfield, as both old guard Republicans and machine Democrats stymied his reform efforts. Yet even Stevenson's more modest successes to clean up state government represented a considerable victory, given the historically inefficient

and politicized nature of state government. As noted the still-relevant opening sentence of this fifty-five-year-old cover story: “Illinois has a long tradition of corruption.”

One of the more notable reforms undertaken by Stevenson was the reorganization of the highly politicized state police force. He also established a long-overdue commission to survey the organization and operation of state government, a process that led to the enactment of dozens of sensible reforms.

If anything, having his picture on the front cover of the nation’s most influential newsweekly showed that Stevenson has indeed “arrived” on the national scene.

FULL TEXT of *Time* cover story about Adlai Stevenson II, January 28, 1952:

Illinois has a long tradition of corruption. A high state official once complacently defined good government as one in which 50¢ of the taxpayer’s dollar went to the state and 50¢ into the politicians’ pockets. And the tradition comes down to very recent times. Three years ago, when Dwight Green was governor, the boodling pols still waxed fat in the land. Nevertheless, in its 133 years, the state has had some really good governors. One was John Peter Altgeld, “the eagle forgotten.” One was Henry Horner, a great Depression governor. And Illinois has a good governor now: Adlai Ewing Stevenson, a political amateur turned pro. In his three years in Springfield, Stevenson has:

- Sent state police out to stop commercial gambling downstate, when local officials failed to act.
- Lopped 1,300 political hangers-on off the state payroll.
- Established a merit system in the state police force, where the 500 jobs had been political plums.
- Increased state aid to school districts.
- Launched a broad road-improvement program, which includes enforcing truck weight limits, a higher gasoline tax and higher truck license fees to pay construction costs.
- Overhauled the state’s welfare program, establishing a merit system, forcing financially able relatives to pay for the care of patients.
- Pushed through 78 bills to streamline the state government.
- Reorganized the political State Commerce Commission, the utility rate setting agency, to make it bipartisan.

Stevenson looks and acts more like a hurrying, harried diplomat than a politician. Nearing 52, he has earned a small tendency to paunch and jowl, but he still gives the impression of slightness, and is light enough on his feet to play a fair game of tennis. His manner is lawyerlike, earnest and—sometimes patiently, sometimes anxiously—engaging. He has a rueful laugh, nervous and sudden, a tongue in his head, and a head on his shoulders. When he has a hard decision to make, he sometimes holds his head as if it hurts him. He has had to make a good many hard decisions as governor of Illinois.

He is a Democrat whom thousands of Illinois Republicans have voted for and probably will vote for again. Even the Chicago Tribune has on occasion mildly approved some of his statesmanlike acts. Again and again he has said in speeches: “I think government should be as small in scope and as local in character as possible.”

Although Adlai Stevenson was a rank amateur in practical politics when he became governor of Illinois in 1949, he inherited a rich family tradition of public service. His ancestral hero is great-grandfather Jesse W. Fell, who trudged into Illinois with a knapsack over his shoulder in 1832. Jesse Fell was a lawyer who became a real-estate developer and city planner, and was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln. He was the first to describe Lincoln as presidential timber. A staunch Republican, Fell proposed the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and played an important part in the Lincoln-for-President campaign.

“The Headsman.”

Meanwhile, Stevenson’s paternal grandfather was busy campaigning against Lincoln. Grandfather Adlai Ewing Stevenson, who walked into Illinois beside a wagon in 1852, was also a lawyer, but an avid Democrat. As Grover Cleveland’s First Assistant Postmaster General, he became known as “the headsman” when he swept some 40,000 Republican postmasters off the payroll. In Cleveland’s second term, he was Vice President. Lewis Green Stevenson, his son, was Illinois’ secretary of state in 1914-16. (Another relative in politics: Vice President Alben Barkley, whose grandmother was Grandfather Adlai’s first cousin.) Father Stevenson tried to warn his son Adlai away from politics. “Don’t ever get mixed up in that dirty game,” he said firmly.

While Governor Stevenson was born a Democrat, his inheritance includes some stoutly Republican forebears. “If it’s true that politics is the art of compromise,” he says, “I’ve had a good start; my mother was a Republican and a Unitarian, my father was a Democrat and a Presbyterian. I ended up in his party and her church.”

A Broken Nose.

The present Adlai Ewing Stevenson was born Feb. 5, 1900, in a rented house in Los Angeles, where his father was assistant general manager of a Hearst paper, the Los Angeles Examiner. When Adlai was six years old, the family returned to Bloomington, Ill., where both Mr. & Mrs. Stevenson had grown up. There Adlai and his sister Elizabeth

(“Buffie”), three years his elder (now Mrs. Ernest Ives, wife of a wealthy, retired U.S. diplomat), grew up in a big Victorian house at 1316 East Washington Street.

Mrs. Stevenson was a possessive mother. She watched closely over her son, and used to read aloud to him—mainly Dickens and Sir Walter Scott. He was not a very sturdy little boy, but he was determined not to be considered a sissy, and often got into fights at public school to prove his point. His nose was broken two or three times in that good cause.

“Rabbit.”

In school, young Adlai was bright, but no scholar. He went to an eastern prep school (Choate) and then to Princeton, where he graduated in 1922. At Princeton he was known as something of a politician and was a moderate success: managing editor of the Daily Princetonian. A Princeton roommate recalls Stevenson as “a nice, harmless, pleasant guy” whose personality got him the nickname “Rabbit.”

He wanted to be a newspaperman, but his father prevailed on him to go to law school. Within two years, he dropped out of Harvard because of low grades. He did better at Northwestern University law school, and passed the Illinois bar examinations in 1926.

Between Harvard and Northwestern, Stevenson worked for 18 months as a reporter and editor on the Bloomington Daily Pantagraph, owned by his mother’s family. He still owns a quarter-interest in that prosperous county paper, and gets most of his income from it. After he got his degree from Northwestern, he went to Russia in an effort to interview Russian Foreign Minister Chicherin, who had refused to talk to foreign correspondents. No interview, but an interesting trip.

As a young lawyer in Chicago, Stevenson enjoyed the North Shore social life, and rode to hounds at Lake Forest. He also began to take an active interest in international affairs; he joined the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and eventually became president. He met and married one of Chicago’s most attractive debutantes, petite and spirited Ellen Borden, of the milk family. They have three sons, Adlai, 21, and Borden, 19, students at Harvard, and John Fell, 15, at Milton Academy, Milton, Mass.

Stevenson’s public service began in the pioneering days of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. In 1933, he went to Washington as special counsel under George N. Peek, administrator of the new Agricultural Adjustment Act. At the end of 1935, he returned to Chicago to practice law.

Decision in Italy.

In the summer of 1941 he was back in Washington again, this time as a special assistant to Frank Knox, Secretary of the Navy. Stevenson wrote Knox’s speeches and acted as his troubleshooter. In 1943, he led a civilian mission to Italy to work on occupation plans. There he “saw a public-opinion poll in which seven out of ten American parents said they

didn't want their boys to enter public life. Think of it! Boys could die in combat, but parents didn't want their children to give their living efforts toward a better America and a better world. I decided then that if I ever had a chance I would seek elective public office."

Later, Stevenson served as an assistant to two Secretaries of State, Edward Stettinius and James Byrnes. He went to the San Francisco United Nations Conference and worked with the U.S. delegation to the U.N. General Assembly. His Washington experience provided him with a story which always gets a chuckle at Illinois political meetings. The Russians had provided specifications for a complicated project and the U.S. Navy was to furnish blueprints. One day a Russian colonel came to Stevenson's office to complain that the blueprints had not been delivered. "We are behind," admitted Stevenson. "But the reason is that you fellows were two weeks behind." The Russian glared at him and said: "Mr. Stevenson, I did not come here to talk about my behind but about your behind."

When Stevenson returned to Chicago in 1947, Illinois was in a political uproar. The press was filled with charges of bribery, payroll padding and other political shenanigans in the administration of Governor Dwight Green, serving his second term.

Like Ronald Colman.

A couple of admirers of Stevenson (one of them a Republican) got together a Stevenson-for-Senator committee and went to see the boss, Jacob M. Arvey, chairman of the Cook County Democratic Committee.

Arvey listened, and then dashed their hopes. He already had a candidate for Senator: Paul Douglas, professor of economics at the University of Chicago. Democratic slate-makers would have preferred Senator Scott Lucas or Chicago's businessman-mayor, Martin Kennelly. Neither would run. So Arvey decided on a gentleman-and-scholar ticket—Stevenson for Governor and Douglas for Senator. Although Stevenson was more interested in the national post, he agreed to run for the statehouse.

After the Democratic bosses had endorsed their gentleman, they began to worry. How would the voters downstate like his Brooks Brothers button-down collars and his Princeton pin-stripe suit? What about his dulcet and cultured tone of voice, which made him sound, to Chicago ears, like Actor Ronald Colman?

But Stevenson soon showed that he had a way with the folks. He was affable, though reserved, and flatteringly humble before the veteran politicians. He told a Jackson Day dinner: "I have a bad case of hereditary politics, and I hope by associating with veterans like you to contract an equally bad case of practical politics." He went after the Green administration with good old Illinois haymakers.

"We cannot allow the rats of corruption and neglect to undermine the foundations of our state any longer," he told a Springfield audience. "The Green machine has given politics and greed the priority over public service and honesty—because the Green machine has

treated politics and morality apart. Each week brings some new revelation. A murder in Peoria reveals evidence of protection of gambling by state officials . . . The machine purchases property at grossly inflated values . . . People want something better than all this cynical, costly, gang government.”

“Hi, Governor.”

This kind of campaigning soon had the Democrats, and many a Republican, cheering Stevenson on. But more than cheers are needed to win a campaign. At times, his supporters had to go out and beg for contributions to pay the overdue rent on the campaign headquarters. “Our campaign funds are so low that it’s become a joke around my house,” said Stevenson. “Even my kids now take one look at me when I come home, say ‘Hi, governor,’ and stick their hands in their pockets to protect their loose change.”

Adlai Stevenson was elected governor by the biggest margin any candidate ever piled up in Illinois: 572,000 votes. He ran well ahead of Douglas, who defeated C. Wayland (“Curly”) Brooks by 407,728, and far ahead of Harry Truman, who carried the state by a slim 33,612. But Stevenson’s resounding victory was bittersweet: the governorship cost him his wife. She had been taking an increasingly unsympathetic view of his public life and its growing demands. Now she left him and asked for a divorce. Less than a year after he became governor, she got her divorce at Las Vegas, Nevada.

In spite of this paralyzing private blow, there was a lot to learn and a lot of work to do. Stevenson plunged in. Running the government of Illinois (pop. 8,712,176) is no job for an amateur. One of the special problems is the fact that more than half the population is in Cook County (Chicago), but the 101 other counties control the legislature. When Governor Stevenson came before a joint session to make his inaugural address, he faced many hostile lawmakers. The Republicans held firm control of the senate, and the Democrats had a narrow margin (80-72) in the house. “We can show the world what a government consecrated to plain talk, hard work and prairie horse sense can do,” he told them. But he admitted privately to friends in those early days in Springfield that he was “rattled.”

Not Consecrated.

Republican Representative Reed F. Cutler hung a sneering label on the gentleman governor: “Sir Galahad.” And many of the old pols in his own party were willing to echo the sneer. Senate Democrats elected Boss Bill Connors, from Chicago’s notorious 42nd Ward, as minority leader. Somehow, gradually, the young amateur won the surly respect of the old pro; before long, Connors was going down the line for almost everything the governor proposed. With his jowls joggling, Connors would run up & down the Senate floor, seizing Democrats by the lapel and growling: “Now vote for this. The little fellow over in the mansion wants you to.”

The 1949 session voted for only a few things the little fellow wanted. But the 1951 session, although this time both houses were controlled by the Republicans, voted for a good many more.

The keys to Stevenson's success have been neither gold nor silver, but steelier and less flashy—patient persistence, hard work, diplomacy, good public relations and able assistance. The 1949 legislature turned down his proposed gasoline-tax increase. For two years he preached its benefits to the citizens of Illinois, then resubmitted it in 1951. This time the legislators deadlocked on how the money should be divided among the state, counties, cities and townships. Stevenson called the leaders to the executive mansion and by 2 a.m. had worked out a compromise. On this issue, as on every other, he had studied exhaustively and, as Jack Arvey put it, had become “an expert on every damned detail.”

Governor Stevenson travels his state twice as much as his unlamented predecessor, but no faster. He still uses the same plane (a twin-engined Beechcraft). In the 36½ months he has been in office, he has traveled, within the state, an estimated 40,000 miles. But he does most of his work in the faded, 95-year-old governor's mansion, as magniloquent and dated as an 1845 oration, at the edge of downtown Springfield. (Since the divorce, the handsome, eleven-room frame house on Stevenson's 70-acre farm at Libertyville has been rented. Its present tenant: Marshall Field Jr., editor of the Chicago Sun-Times, and an old friend.) In the 28-room, brick-and-stone governor's mansion, Stevenson sleeps in a second-floor bedroom; on the walls hang portraits of great-grandfather and grandmother Fell and grandfather Stevenson. (The governor's ex-wife once remarked: “There must be some Japanese in the Stevensons; they worship their ancestors so.”) Stevenson works at a long desk in a basement office.

Shoes Without Spikes.

Stevenson gets up about 7, is at his desk shortly after 9, and usually has lunch there on a tray. Before dinner, he likes a bourbon “cold toddy” (on the rocks, with a little sugar and water). After dinner, he often returns to his desk for several hours. The executive mansion is adequately staffed with servants, but none of them sleeps there. The only residents are Stevenson and one of his executive assistants, William McCormick Blair, wealthy Republican and cousin of the Chicago Tribune's Bertie McCormick. On the nights when Bill Blair goes to a movie, it is up to the governor to lock up and turn out the lights—which he does, before climbing to the lonely grandeur of his bedroom.

Always a frugal man, Stevenson has bought one new suit since he became governor. A favorite item in his wardrobe is an old pair of golf shoes with the spikes removed. Besides the plane, he uses a state-owned black 1940 Cadillac sedan which has traveled over 300,000 miles. These sparing habits have gained him a reputation as a close man with a buck, whether it is his or the state's. He is not a poor man. He is said to be worth about half a million dollars, with an income, including his \$12,000-a-year salary as governor and dividends from the Bloomington Pantagraph stock and other property, of about \$50,000 a year.

Though his life seems to be all work, Stevenson nevertheless manages to get some fun out of it. When the legislature handed him a bird lovers' bill to prohibit cats from running at large, he vetoed it with the comment: "It is in the nature of cats to do a certain amount of unescorted roaming ... In my opinion, the State of Illinois and its local governing bodies already have enough to do without trying to control feline delinquency."

Though he has been a reasonably quick study in "the art of the possible," he still feels indignation—more than he allows himself to show—over the kind of moral apathy that makes good government difficult. Last fall, after he found out that private clubs and fraternal and veterans' organizations were operating most of the slot machines in Illinois, he threw a handful of lemons at these politically powerful groups. Said he: "I know all the arguments about 'the slot machine in the country club is one thing and the slot machine in the corner saloon another.' But I also know that the machine is against the law as it stands on the books; and I know that the citizen who "violates the law in his country club or fraternal lodge is in no position to, and does not in fact, insist that his elected officers enforce the law in the corner saloon . . . Many of our most reputable and influential citizens [thus] sterilize their power and influence to demand and get faithful performance by their local officials. They have tied their own hands and stopped their own mouths."

Was Steffens Right?

This month, as Stevenson announced his candidacy for re-election, he demonstrated that he has come a long way toward learning how to play practical politics. He had let word leak out that he might not run. That brought anxious looks to the eyes of Democratic slate-makers, who are sure they need him to carry Illinois this year. Then he let them know that, if he did run, he would want a strong slate. And he added that he didn't think State's Attorney John Boyle of Chicago was a good candidate. Stevenson has largely kept hands off law enforcement in Cook County, on the theory that local authorities are better equipped and better staffed to handle it. But he didn't like the way Boyle had done the job. The slate-makers promptly dumped Boyle overboard. Sir Galahad was getting to know his way around.

If Lincoln Steffens was right, corruption is the norm of U.S. political life; in spite of reform, the pols always come back; the Sir Galahads, sooner or later, get licked, or get laughed out of court, or join the gang. But men like Adlai Stevenson have dedicated themselves to a more hopeful and more dynamic proposition: that the U.S. is not a static pattern but a still-continuing experiment—an experiment, among other things, in good government.

Last week President Truman summoned Governor Stevenson to Washington. Why? Did he want Stevenson to run as Vice President? That was one rumor. Or had Truman decided not to run at all, and to ask Stevenson to head the Democratic ticket? That was another rumor. Or was the oldest, biggest pol of them all turning to Sir Galahad for advice on how to win? That seems hardly likely.

Whatever the truth behind the rumors, this much was evident: in a cold season for the Democrats, Adlai Stevenson is politically hot, and Harry Truman feels the need of a little warmth.

Discussion Questions:

1. What were some of Stevenson's statewide reforms as Governor? Did he favor a strong centralized state government?
2. What is a political boss? Why were some bosses threatened by Stevenson, a political newcomer?

Keywords: Harry Truman, New Hampshire primary, Republican Party, Democratic Party, Republicans, Democrats, government corruption, political corruption, Franklin Roosevelt, New Deal, World War II, WW II, isolationism, United Nations, UN, 1950s Illinois politics, illegal gambling, government reform, political boss