EPILOGUE:
OF BOSSES AND BOSSING

As one looks back upon the development of urban political machines and upon the career of Richard J. Daley as the “last of the bosses,” one is tempted to argue that the question generally asked should not be, “Why has the machine survived only in a few places?” but rather, “Why has it not survived elsewhere?” The reasons for this are only partly clear, but they provide a reasonable focus for some summary thoughts about the relationship of the political machine to its electoral base.

In looking at the careers of the men considered in this book, we see a natural progression or development among them; they have a good deal in common. The challenges differed from time to time and from place to place, but their relationships with the electorate remained fairly consistent. None of these bosses seems in any way extraordinary. They were highly competent, well-trained in a practical sense for their particular kind of work, and able to maintain focus on their major goal—which in the case of all but perhaps Tweed was the same: power. This, plus the professional politician’s understanding of the need to compromise, to give in where there is no possibility of overriding, was central to their success. In Daley’s later years, and since his death, the Chicago machine tried to ignore this need, denying to blacks the share of power their numbers demanded; and they did so at great cost.

One reason the machine survived in Chicago while it declined in most other places is the legal milieu in which Chicago exists. New York and other states gradually changed their laws governing civil service, partisan elections, the power of political parties, primaries, and so on (non-machine cities usually experienced these changes very early, during the Progressive Era). But Illinois was very slow to make changes of this kind. Cumulative
voting for the lower house of the state legislature, for example, prevailed until very recently, despite frequent attacks from those who wanted to diminish the power of party. Little change in the patronage system, or in other built-in advantages to the existing parties, came about over the years. This legal structure does not guarantee that politics in Chicago will maintain the form that existed under Daley and his predecessors, but it does make that form possible, whereas it no longer is in most American cities.

The partisan, extralocal aspect of the urban political machine's strength has also been crucial. Daley, for example, was the local leader of that political party to which most ordinary Chicagoans were loyal—in formal membership or just in voting proclivity. This has not always been true for urban machines, but it has been for those that lasted any length of time. Other things being equal, or even nearly equal, this provides a real edge. It is also a phenomenon that is to some degree outside the machine's and the boss's control; in this regard, then, luck does play a role. The Philadelphia Republican machine, for example, had a long and successful life, which failed, in large part, because by the 1930s it was allied to the wrong side of the political ledger.

Patronage, and organization itself, were always central to machine success, because they related directly to a hold on the mass base of the machine and were a key element in its structure and maintenance. The Daley machine, for example, or that of Murphy in New York, were among the major employers of their regions. And if "reform" over the years removed some jobs from machine control, the tremendous increase in all governmental bureaucracies more than compensated for the loss, especially in cities like Chicago, with their supportive statutory environment. As Table 5.1 indicates, among all employed Chicagoans above the age of sixteen in 1970, 13 percent worked for some governmental agency and 8 percent worked for local government. This means that tens of thousands of families, from the very humble to the upper reaches of the middle class, are directly or indirectly beholden to the machine for their material support. And they influence others, since it is in their interest to do so.

The machine has existed because it has been able to respond quickly and directly to the needs of the very large numbers of dependent or semidependent people to be found in the modern American city. Changes in law and in the distribution of wealth have only partly affected this phenomenon. New dependent peoples have replaced others; and new kinds of dependency have been created by the very system designed to end the old ones. As long as the country maintains a division of powers between national and local governments, with the latter serving as an intervening administrative entity between the former and the masses, there remains the possibility for the city and county to continue providing the kinds of
services which Plunkitt described so well at the turn of the century, as well as newer ones that characterize a middle-class society.

One important expansion Daley made in the support of the machine can be described as vertical rather than horizontal. The traditional mass base of the machine was supplemented by his successful wooing of the city's—and the suburbs'—financial, economic, and social elite. This was not the first time business leaders and machine politicians had cooperated, but under Daley that cooperation was institutionalized. In accomplishing this, it can be argued, the machine was trying, increasingly, to serve mutually conflicting interests, and thus had to slight the needs of its mass base. This is to some degree true, as those who have lost their homes to urban renewal, their jobs to postindustrialization, or their physical well-being to hits on the head by police would testify. But I think this also relates to changes in the nature of the city; it was as important for Daley to add the support of these elite groups as it was for Kelly to add the blacks, or Murphy the Jews. Machines were in the past able to work with mutually antipathetic cultural groups, and it is not necessarily any harder to do the same with economic and social ones.

Indeed, there were indications that for Daley, as for Thompson and others, holding together the machine's disparate mass elements was difficult primarily owing to social and power conflict within the working class itself, and especially across racial lines. That the Daley machine won its victories with a negative relationship to voter turnout, and that turnout generally declined so much, were the unhealthiest omens—for machine politics—of all. We might say of all urban machines, and certainly of the Chicago machine, that over time victory came not because the machine was so popular but because there were no viable alternatives to mold a firmer voter coalition. In Chicago, for example, the Republicans were long frustrated because they were, quite simply, Republicans, and accordingly for decades had little ideological or practical appeal to the urban masses. Third parties have been too poor and weak (here, New York, since the 1930s, has been different, and the Democratic machine has declined accordingly) to offer a real option. So those who have not liked the machine have very often just stayed at home, as was long the case with Chicago's blacks; sometimes they stayed at home in such numbers that, together, they could have elected a mayor.

Machine-run cities have not avoided the deep social and racial tensions of modern America, but neither have they experienced them to a disproportionately high degree. Mayor Daley, for example, could well be accused of what I have suggested may be the major failing of "bossism": it is a political situation that is innately conservative and defensive and that tends, by its very nature, to avoid controversy and division. Thus it does
not provide much in the way of leadership or planning for the future. Associated with this has been the tribal nature of the largely Irish leadership of most machines. They have been leery of the leadership aspirations of all outgroups—Jews, Italians, the various Slavic groups, for example—from the late nineteenth century to the present. Blacks and Hispanics are just two additional, perhaps even more alien, rivals whose group identities and political interests were to be feared and resisted at the same time as they were being co-opted into support of the machine. This is hard to do, and has been one of the greatest tests of urban political organizations since the rise of American cities.

The tendency to put off the resolution of real social and economic issues and to ignore the aspirations of newer groups was as true of Daley as it was of Tweed and Murphy. Daley did not really try to find new paths of racial accommodation, of easing the economic and social plight of the urban poor, of halting the deterioration of the public school system or the "white flight" to the suburbs, of making the city more livable psychologically and emotionally as well as physically. Nor was he really receptive to allotting more than the minimum necessary power inside the machine to non-Irish groups. These phenomena have been characteristic of machine rule. They are also what led to the post-Daley politics of Chicago, and may be what will turn it and other cities into racial fortresses before the end of this century. But Daley and other bosses did not do demonstrably worse in these respects than mayors and political organizations referred to in less pejorative terms. We should be aware of the weaknesses of bossism, but we should also be aware that alternative political forms have not done much better.

In a way, one can argue that the system itself is perhaps overstressed. That, for example, Chicago, has a highly partisan, very structured political system, whereas Los Angeles has very much the opposite and is physically also a very different city, should not cloak the fact that their problems and failings are much more alike than they are different. The city as a political unit deals, within its statutory and other abilities, with the social, ethnic, economic, and other forces of its times. The form of its government is not unimportant, nor are the quality and commitment of the people who govern. But the problems themselves, and the social and cultural nexus, are really the crux of it all. These are often general and national problems: in part they are attitudinal and essentially private problems whose ultimate solution cannot come from any kind of legislation or other government action.

We are properly concerned with trying to understand which form of government—urban, national, or other—is most likely to deal creatively,
efficiently, and honestly with a society's problems. In these pages I have tried to suggest the nature, and the strengths and weaknesses, of one general urban approach that has been around for over a century. This form, by whatever name we choose to call it, has performed some essential services in a distinctive way. Its relative value is in the final analysis subject to personal evaluation. But we must beware, in our judgmental process, of focusing too narrowly on form or, for that matter, of relying too heavily on government at all—especially in the sense that government can operate on a plane beyond what citizens themselves believe and desire.

Democratic government—partisan or nonpartisan, amateur or professional, idealistic or cynical—is a reflection of its society; it can be nothing else. When one lives with the advantages of a democratic polity, however imperfect it may be, one must realize that one lives under a system that, through representation, does require us to deal ourselves with our problems as a society. The trouble, indeed, is not with the governors, but with the governed, whom they represent only too well.