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## Legalized gambling is a voluntary 'regressive tax'

The mightiest and most capable of all of the Greeks of antiquity was none other than Odysseus. It is nearly impossible to find a better example of a true leader. Odysseus was a fierce warrior. He was a man of great honor, yet able to control his pride. He was a singular orator and gave sound, prudent advice, all while being clever and using his brains to solve the most inscrutable situations. The Trojan Horse was Odysseus' idea and cleverly brought an end to the decade-long bloodbath we call the Trojan War.

Homer's "Odyssey" tells the tale of Odysseus' struggle to return home from that war, which because of the gods' disfavor, was no easy trip. Indeed, Odysseus' travels home were a journey (an odyssey, if you will) where he encountered and overcame one insurmountable challenge after another.

One of Odysseus' more difficult challenges involved getting past the Sirens, sea creatures who lived on one of the islands on his path. The Sirens sang irresistible songs to ships that passed nearby and could "spellbind" any sailor. As Homer put it, "Whoever draws too close, off guard, and catches the Sirens' voices in the air — no sailing home for him, no wife rising to meet him, no happy children beaming up at their father's face. The high, thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him, lolling there in their meadow, round them heaps of corpses rotting away, rags of skin shriveling on their bones ..."

As the story goes, when clever Odysseus' ship neared these creatures, he directed his crew to tie him to its mast, to put wax in their ears, to keep rowing and to ignore whatever orders might come out of his mouth while he listened to Sirens' songs. And when he heard the "ravishing voices" of these beasts, he screamed and hollered and ordered his men to set him free, to untie him, to let him run at once to the seductive voices. Lucky for him though, his intrepid men ignored his orders and only rowed all the harder, ferrying their master past certain destruction.

This brings us to legalized gambling in Illinois. In the early 1990s, riverboat casinos suddenly popped up all over the state. Their existence here was a major paradigm shift, as legalized gambling (or "gaming," the euphemism of choice for those who seek to mollify its illicit nature) was being extended beyond its prior abodes of Las Vegas and Atlantic City, N.J. Legalized gambling was sold to be not only a job creator, but a way to finally fund schools that had been for too long



### Law & Politics

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underfunded, that gambling would, in the end, be good "for the children." So riverboat casinos opened around the state, in places like Aurora and Elgin, cities desperate for economic shots in the arm. And it has been that way ever since; until now.

On Tuesday, the Illinois Senate passed by a 30-27 vote what the Chicago Tribune called a "sprawling new system of legalized gambling." Newly minted Mayor Emanuel is reported to have personally taken an interest in the bill, calling legislators and garnering support. The bill now sits with Gov. Patrick J. Quinn and awaits his signature.

If signed, Illinois' new gambling bill will not only add slot machines to existing casinos and introduce them at horse racetracks, but will create new casinos in Chicago (thus the mayor's interest), Park City, Rockford, Danville and in a yet-to-be-identified Chicago suburb. It will also give casinos massive tax breaks and open the door to riverboat casinos moving onto land.

The bill is bad for Illinois. Casinos like playing the games that they offer because they are games that casinos cannot lose. Every game is a winner for the casino and the more its patrons play, the more money it will win. Put another way, casino games are by their very definition losers for everyone except the house. That's why the house plays them.

How did this legislation pass so quickly, seemingly without any public discussion at all, with the feel of a middle-of-the-night Meigs Field closing? First, there was an earmark for everyone including the racetracks, the county fair, minorities and women. Second, the bill not surprisingly promised the carrot of new revenue for myriad social programs (including, ironically, treatment for gambling addiction). Third, and perhaps most importantly, the bill's new casinos have been touted as Illinois' quickest way to close — or at least put a dent in — its

pending \$15 billion budget deficit.

Several years ago, I was involved in a case against one Illinois casino. It involved allegations of fraudulent payout information on some of its slot machines. After the case's resolution, my colleagues and I visited the establishment. Really, it was hard not to be taken aback not only by the number of elderly there, but even more so by the number of gambling elderly pulling oxygen tanks connected to cannula in their nostrils. The majority of the remaining clientele I observed in my unscientific survey were either young males, or people who generally appeared to be from the lower quadrants of our state's economic strata. For sure, I didn't see anyone that looked like a suburban chamber of commerce member.

What does the proposed gambling legislation really mean for Illinois? It means that Illinois will undertake to balance its bloated budget not by belt-tightening and shrewd fiscal management, but by becoming ever more so a tacit participant in games of chance with its own citizens.

Put another way, legalized casino gambling in Illinois is simply a voluntary "regressive tax"; it collects money from the elderly and generally speaking, lower (not higher) income residents to fund state enterprises. More gambling is tantamount to a "regressive tax" increase.

If this legislation passes, then what? Why draw the line only at gambling? Indeed, the justifications offered for this act could justify almost anything including legalized prostitution and illicit drugs. Why not an Illinois brothel? And then perhaps an Illinois opium den?

Those in the Illinois House and Senate who voted to expand gambling succumbed to the seductive song of the gambling Siren, to the irresistible promise that its expansion would make Illinois and more importantly its people, better and not worse.

Now it's up to Quinn to put an end to this lunacy. He has no choice but to become Odysseus. He must put wax in the ears of his comrades and order them to tie him down until he safely sails past the Sirens' irresistible songs, with all their seductive promises of "jobs" and "social programs" and other lucre. Indeed, Quinn should simply stick to his prior pledges to "oppose any large-scale expansion of gambling" in Illinois.

But with his recent comments of being "open" to more casinos, it seems that our governor may have already become transfixed by the seductive songs. For the sake of our state and its residents, let's hope not.