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The power-hungry do not need to apply

It was a cold and snowy night. A man, a good man no less, was at the end of his rope. Though he had spent his life sacrificing himself for others, subjugating his own interests for people whose appreciation of his actions was questionable, he now stood alone. The weight of the world was on his shoulders as he was about to take the fall for someone else. He saw no way out, save one: To admit defeat and jump to his death.

We all know the rest of the story. It is at that point that George Bailey's guardian angel appears to teach him that his life has not been for naught. The angel allows George to see, if but for a night, what the world would have been like without him. It is then that his significance crystallizes.

The angel shows George that without him, the idyllic Bedford Falls, a town of white picket fences, soda fountains and high school dances is no more. George's absence causes the town to fall into the hands of the covetous Mr. Henry ("tell the congressman to wait") Potter, a Scroogelike villain consumed by greed and the pursuit of power. Potter transforms Bedford Falls into "Pottersville," a seedy strip of bars replete with establishments like the "Bamboo Room," "Dime a Dance" and "20 Gorgeous Girls." As for the townspeople, they became a carnal and depressed lot. Without George's contribution, their lives are dark and bitter and troubled.

George's encounter with his guardian angel gives him the dose of reality he needs to realize that his life was indeed a wonderful one. It is only then that all is restored. George returns home to his family and

the town rallies behind him.

The moral of the story, I believe, is this: When good people step into the fray, they will be sure to suffer and the impact of their actions may be hard to see, but their impact can be profound. It is then that good triumphs over evil. Put another way, without such people, everyone suffers.

Which, of course, brings us to Illinois. This column has often lamented a sad but unquestionable truth: Illinois politics is an incubator of corruption.

Recently, Chicago was deemed the nation's most corrupt city and Illinois its third most corrupt state. How did we earn such distinctions? One answer, of course, is revealed by Plato's maxim that "the state in which the rulers are most reluctant to govern is always the best and

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most quietly governed, and the state in which they are most eager, the worst." Illinois certainly has a lot of beavers who are eager for government sinecures and the accompanying prestige, power, salaries and pensions.

So, the problem is obvious. Our state is ruled by power brokers, kingmakers whose quest for and accumulation of power has led to the inexorable growth in the size of their fiefdoms (government). Despite the chronic budget shortages and financial disasters they have wrought, these people seem to be financially thriving on a personal level, making money hand over fist. It certainly seems that many of them (we all know who they are) have succeeded in placing their own interests above those of who they serve.

When it comes to "solving" serious political problems, our current leaders have a one-track mind and it's always on creative ways to increase the income side of the ledger, regardless of the

social cost (kudos to the governor for at least saying last week that pensions and Medicaid need reform).

Consider, for example, Chicago's recent sponsorship of a bill permitting the installation of countless speed cameras in "school zones" to monitor people's driving and doll out \$100 tickets. Or how about the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority's recent doubling, yes doubling, of its tolls?

But worse is that our state legislature has not, in true Pottersville fashion, shied from dealing in vice, with the ubiquitous and annoying Illinois lottery, or the newly minted juggernaut casino that opened in Des Plaines, just off the tollway and brightly lit for all drivers to see. Further, there is never-ending talk of a casino in downtown Chicago. To be sure, Mr. Potter would be proud.

How do we change this paradigm? How do we actually solve our problems? It's simple. The answer is you, Chicago lawyers. You need to get involved — but there is a catch — you are needed only if you are reluctant; only if you don't want to get involved; only if you don't want to be in the spotlight; only if you don't want power; only if you don't like the game; or better yet, only if you don't see it as a game.

Indeed, it is you, George Bailey. Your state and your city need you now, more than ever. So get moving.

Mr. Potter is alive and well and he has been quite active in Illinois these past few decades. And so he has to be stopped. Because really, who among us wants to raise our children in Pottersville?