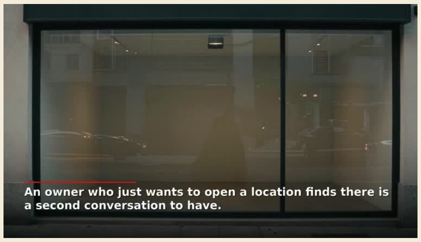
SERIES: CORRUPT AMERICA

The Alderman Who Wanted a Cut

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

For fifty-four years, one man held the same seat on the Chicago City Council. His name was Edward Burke. He chaired the Finance Committee — the body that controls how Chicago spends its money — for roughly three decades. In the spring of twenty twenty-four, a federal jury found him guilty of racketeering, bribery, and extortion. I'm Marty Shepard, and this is Corrupt America.

CAROL

Fifty-four years on the same council seat. I genuinely cannot tell if that's a record to admire or the first sentence of an indictment.

MARTY

In this case, it turned out to be both. Burke was first elected to represent Chicago's Fourteenth Ward in nineteen sixty-nine. He was twenty-five years old, which is remarkable in itself. By the time the F B I came knocking, he was in his mid-seventies and had outlasted more mayors than most people bother to count.

CAROL

That kind of longevity — you'd think someone would have looked sideways at him earlier. Or maybe that's exactly the problem. He'd been there so long that looking sideways felt like bad manners.

MARTY

That gets at something structural worth understanding. The Finance Committee in Chicago isn't just a budget committee. It controls tax incentive programs, it approves city contracts, it can advance or quietly bury almost any piece of business that needs the council's blessing. Chairing it for decades is a kind of power that doesn't announce itself loudly. It just sits there, patient, like a tollbooth on every road into the city.

CAROL

And Burke had his own law firm on the side.

MARTY

He did. It specialized in property tax appeals — a narrow lane, but in a city with Chicago's commercial real estate market, an extremely lucrative narrow lane. Property tax appeals are how businesses challenge their assessed values and try to lower what they owe Cook County. Burke's firm was capable. The question the government eventually asked was not whether the firm could do the work. The question was why so many companies were suddenly so good at finding it.

CAROL
That's the whole thing, isn't it. Not the law firm itself, but how the phone rang.

MARTY
The indictment, and the conviction, told that story precisely. Businesses that needed something from the city — a zoning variance, a tax incentive, an approval of almost any kind — would find themselves in conversations with a particular shape. They needed the Finance Committee to move. Ed Burke chaired the Finance Committee. And Ed Burke's law firm had availability.

CAROL
I keep thinking about the people on the other end of those conversations. Some owner who just wants to open a location or renovate a building, and suddenly they're doing political arithmetic they never signed up for.

MARTY
That's exactly where the human cost lives. The court record names several companies — a fast food franchise operator, a bank seeking city business, among others — that prosecutors say were steered toward Burke's firm not on the merits, but because of what the alternative implied. If you didn't retain Burke, your approval might move slowly. Or not at all. Nobody had to say that out loud. That was the elegance of it, if elegance is the right word.

CAROL
It's extortion with a letterhead.

MARTY
That is essentially what the jury found. The formal charges were racketeering, bribery, and related extortion offences. Racketeering, in the federal sense, means a pattern of corrupt acts carried out through an enterprise — and here, the enterprise was Burke's own aldermanic office. The jury deliberated and returned guilty verdicts in twenty twenty-four. He was seventy-nine years old.

CAROL
And the sentence?

MARTY
Two years in federal prison and a fine of two million dollars. His defense had argued for leniency on account of his age and his decades of public service. The sentencing judge acknowledged both. Then sentenced him anyway.

CAROL
Can I ask something that's been sitting with me?

MARTY
Go ahead.

CAROL
The Finance Committee controls city money. He chaired it for decades. Was any of this actually hidden? Or was it just — visible to anyone who cared to look?

MARTY
The court record doesn't support the idea that Burke was operating in shadows. The law firm was a matter of public record. His aldermanic office was a matter of public record. The connection between the two was available to be seen by anyone who wanted to see it. Whether that makes the people around him complicit, or simply experienced navigators of a system they didn't build, is a harder moral question than any jury verdict is asked to settle.

CAROL
What strikes me is that there was never a moment where he fell. Burke didn't stumble into this — he built it, carefully, over the better part of a lifetime. That takes a kind of patience most people don't have for anything.

MARTY
He did. And that's what makes the story something other than a simple fall-from-grace. He wasn't an idealist who got worn down. The Finance Committee isn't glamorous. Nobody writes the thriller about the Finance Committee. But it touches everything, which means the person who chairs it — patiently, for thirty years — touches everything too.

CAROL
The plainness of it is what unsettles me. Not the drama. Just how ordinary the machinery is.

MARTY
Here is the detail I find hardest to set aside: Burke was still the alderman of the Fourteenth Ward in November of twenty eighteen when the F B I executed search warrants on his City Hall office. He was still on the city council when he was indicted in twenty nineteen. He remained alderman through the years of the

legal proceedings. He finally declined to seek reelection in twenty twenty-three — after more than half a century — and left office. The trial came the following year. He was convicted at seventy-nine.

CAROL

He served the ward for longer than most of his constituents had been alive.

MARTY

What the Burke case leaves open is a question that cases like this one tend to leave open: how much of what happened was Burke specifically, and how much was a structure that would have produced a Burke regardless of who filled the seat? Courts answer the narrower question. They found one man guilty of one pattern of conduct. The broader question — what a city allows to persist when it looks the other way long enough — stays in the room after the verdict is read.

CAROL

And to be clear, because it matters: Burke was convicted. This is not alleged. The jury came back.

MARTY

It is not alleged. Edward Burke was convicted by a federal jury of racketeering, bribery, and extortion-related offences arising from his use of the Finance Committee chairmanship to steer private property tax legal work to his own law firm. He was sentenced to two years in prison and fined two million dollars. Those are the facts as a court found them. The wider question — what a city owes the people who trusted it with fifty-four years — is the one no sentence can fully answer. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. Thanks for sitting with us.