

SERIES: CORRUPT AMERICA ♦

The Speaker and the Utility Company

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Thirty-six years. That is how long Michael Madigan served as Speaker of the Illinois House — longer than any legislative leader in the recorded history of the United States. I'm Marty Shepard, and this is Corrupt America.

CAROL

Thirty-six years. My neighbor has lived next door for thirty years and I still don't know her middle name. I can't imagine having that kind of reach over one place for that long.

MARTY

Madigan first became Speaker in nineteen eighty-three. He held the position, with one brief interruption, until twenty twenty-one — two years before the federal charges arrived. During those decades, he was not simply the presiding officer of a legislative chamber. He was, by any practical measure, the dominant figure in Illinois politics. He controlled committee assignments. He controlled the calendar. He controlled who got a hearing and who waited in the hall.

CAROL

And I imagine after enough years, people stop questioning it. It just becomes how things work.

MARTY

It becomes the infrastructure. And Commonwealth Edison — ComEd, the largest electric utility in Illinois — had a great deal of legislation it needed to move, or stop, or shape. According to federal prosecutors, beginning around two thousand and eleven, ComEd began funneling payments to associates and allies that Madigan put forward — people connected to his political organization, including committeemen from his home base in Chicago's thirteenth ward — for consulting work that those people largely did not perform.

CAROL

So these are people cashing checks for jobs that weren't really jobs.

MARTY

That is how the government characterized it, yes. The payments moved through law firms and consulting arrangements. The amounts ran into the millions. And what ComEd received in return, prosecutors alleged, was favorable treatment in Springfield — legislation that helped the utility's bottom line, including a rate structure law worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the company. The scheme, as the government described it, was not crude. It had layers. It had intermediaries. It was built to look, at a distance, like ordinary political consulting.

CAROL

Which is the part that makes my stomach turn a little, honestly. It's not someone stuffing cash in a briefcase. It's paperwork. It's invoices. It looks like a business.

MARTY

It looks exactly like a business, and that is much of the point. In twenty twenty, ComEd itself entered a deferred prosecution agreement with federal authorities. The utility admitted to the scheme and agreed to pay two hundred million dollars. Several ComEd executives and lobbyists were separately charged and convicted. The company cooperated with investigators. And its cooperation pointed, in considerable detail, toward Madigan.

CAROL

When the company raises its hand and says "yes, we did this" — that changes the weight of everything that comes after.

MARTY

It does. The indictment that followed named Madigan on twenty-three counts, including racketeering, bribery, and wire fraud. The trial began in Chicago in the fall of twenty twenty-four and ran for months. Prosecutors put former ComEd executives on the stand. Those witnesses described the operation in operational terms — who initiated the calls, what was requested, how the payments were structured to avoid the appearance of what they were.

CAROL

I keep thinking about the people in Illinois who were just paying their electric bills during all of this. They're sitting at their kitchen tables opening envelopes. They have no idea.

MARTY

They have no idea. And the government made that argument explicitly — that ratepayers, ordinary households and small businesses keeping the lights on,

ultimately bore the cost of a utility that had to spend money maintaining access to the Speaker's office. Those costs don't appear on an itemized bill. They're in the rate structure, in the legislation, in the numbers nobody outside Springfield is watching. In February of twenty twenty-five, the jury returned its verdict. Madigan was convicted on ten of twenty-three counts — bribery, wire fraud, and related charges. The jury deadlocked on the racketeering count. That count was not retried.

CAROL

Ten convictions out of twenty-three — I have to ask, is there any world in which that reads as a partial victory for him?

MARTY

Not in any meaningful sense. Ten federal felony convictions is not a partial victory. In September of twenty twenty-five, Madigan was sentenced to seven and a half years in federal prison and ordered to pay a fine of two and a half million dollars. He was eighty-three years old at sentencing. His attorneys appealed immediately. In April of twenty twenty-six, the federal appeals court upheld the conviction. He maintains his innocence.

CAROL

Eighty-three. He'd already been out of the Speakership for four years before any of that happened.

MARTY

He had resigned the Speakership in January of twenty twenty-one, under significant pressure from members of his own caucus, before any indictment. He had represented his legislative district without interruption since nineteen seventy-one. Half a century. Now, this series has already told a story that rhymes closely with this one — a utility company, a legislative leader, payments routed to allies in exchange for a favorable bill. That story belongs to Ohio, and to a different party. The fact that the same blueprint appeared in two states, in the same era, in both parties, is something the court record simply contains. The record draws its own conclusions.

CAROL

And the blueprint is so ordinary, isn't it. It's not complicated. It's just — someone has something you want, and you find a way to make it worth their while, and you make it look like something else.

MARTY

It is not complicated. What Madigan's case adds, because of its scale and its duration, is a picture of what institutional power looks like when it has been systematically turned to private benefit. Not a single transaction. Not one favor returned. A structure. A long, stable, quietly functioning structure in which the ordinary workings of a state legislature were available, for a price, to a private company, and the people who elected the Speaker had no idea it was for sale.

CAROL

That's the part I keep coming back to. Every person in Illinois who ever called their state representative about something — a road, a school, a zoning issue — they're doing it in good faith. They think the system is there for them.

MARTY

They think the system is there for them. And most of the time, most people working in that system believe it too. That is the particular damage of a long, structural corruption — it doesn't just bend the outcome of one bill. It erodes the assumption that the building is for the public at all. Madigan was convicted in February of twenty twenty-five on ten federal counts. The conviction was upheld on appeal in April of twenty twenty-six. He has maintained his innocence throughout. As of this recording, further appeals are pending. He is eighty-three years old, and that is where the record stands. ...I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. Thank you for listening.