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An early Christmas gift from Stroger

November 19, 2006

BY CAROL MARIN Sun-Times Columnist

Gerald Nichols has lots to be thankful for this Thanksgiving. He's still making \$114,000 thanks to us, the ever-generous taxpayers of Cook County. Nichols draws his salary from the highway department even though everybody knows his personal rest stop is located inside Cook County Board President John Stroger's office. That's where Nichols doled out jobs to the politically worthy if not the professionally qualified. The FBI is investigating his role in county hiring. Interim Board President Bobbie Steele admitted in September she didn't have a clue what Nichols really did. But she suspended him -- *with pay*.

Last week, in a television interview, Todd Stroger, his father's anointed and recently elected successor, was asked when he would make good on his reluctant promise to finally fire Nichols.

"In due time," replied the new president.

What did that mean? I asked him that question last Monday on WTTW's "Chicago Tonight." "After Christmas," he said, smiling.

Sun-Times reporter Steve Patterson followed up the next day when Stroger dropped in to observe Tuesday's meeting of the county board. Why, asked Patterson, was he waiting to dump Nichols until "after Christmas"?

Stroger's amazing reply: "Who lets anybody go before Christmas?"

Well, Mr. President-elect, maybe somebody who promised to care more about taxpayers than about their 8th Ward political pals. Maybe somebody who swore to be his own man and do things differently than his dad. Maybe somebody who is determined to erase any doubt about finally, finally setting a new direction for a bloated, near-bankrupt county government that has a budget the size of Montana's.

Besides, you know what's after Christmas? New Year's Eve. Now that's a miserable time to get the ax. It would wreck the effects of the champagne.

And then there's Valentine's Day. Who, with any love in his heart, lets somebody go before Valentine's Day?

And you can't do it before St. Patrick's Day. It's a political holy day of obligation honoring our enduring patronage traditions. Who with any payroller-pride would fire a guy before the green beer and corned beef?

And Easter being a time of rebirth and renewal, it's an awful time to get a pink slip, especially when county hiring depends upon rebirth and renewal even when they pretend there's a job freeze in place.

Before you know it, it will be Christmas again.

Sorich sentencing

Robert Sorich's Thanksgiving will not be festive. He and three co-defendants will be sentenced in federal court on Monday.

Sorich, Mayor Daley's former patronage chief, is going to prison for a long time. A longer time, in all likelihood, than Donald Tomczak, one of the most egregious bullies and bribe takers in the whole, sordid Hired Truck scandal at City Hall.



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Oscar contenders will become clearer this week

How is that possible?

Because Tomczak flipped and became a government witness and Sorich and three co-defendants did not.

Sorich and the others were guilty of rigging the hiring and promotion of city workers whose political connections trumped their qualifications. Sorich and company hired an army of Daley loyalists to guarantee power stayed in its proper place.

For that, U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald is asking that Sorich spend 57 to 71 months behind bars. Tomczak, who grabbed at least \$400,000 in cash along the way, got only 47 months.

It's not that I excuse Sorich or believe he's innocent.

I don't, and he's not.

But at his trial, the government offered a parade of witnesses who got a huge pass for their own actions or failures to act. Mary Jo Falcon, an attorney and personnel director in the Sewer Department, for 11 years handled "blessed lists" of patronage hires but was given immunity from prosecution. Mara Georges, the head of the city's Law Department who apparently kept her eyes clamped shut and ears closed, was an even more disturbing government witness for being allowed to get away with an unacceptable "ostrich defense."

Sorich's crime does not fit the time.

Legislative largess

Oh, great. Illinois senators can even find passages in the Bible to justify their post-election pay hike of 9.3 percent but are *this close* to refusing to help 300,000 mostly senior citizens on fixed incomes get a *tiny* bit of relief from skyrocketing rents in the state's manufactured home parks.


I promised to keep you posted on this bill. The governor, Rod the Populist, who has gotten sizable contributions from the big-business owners of these manufactured home communities, vetoed the bill. The House last week mustered the votes to override him.

But the Senate is still in doubt, the same Senate that just made sure their own pay raise went through.

How odd that opponents of the manufactured housing bill cry "rent control" -- even though it isn't -- but don't yell "wage control" when it comes to hiking the salaries for the governor and Legislature? Just call it extra gravy on their turkeys.

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