

A role model for L.A.? Chicago

Steve Lopez
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The sun cast golden light across the metropolis, flowers overflowed baskets hanging from every post, people by the thousands strolled through massive parks or sunbathed on sandy beaches, enjoying public spaces with little or no trash, graffiti or homeless encampments.

This city's got pride, I thought while walking along the river under swaying cranes. It also has a clear sense that someone's in charge, ruling with an iron fist and rallying support for even greater imaginings.

Unfortunately I was not in Los Angeles or even in California.

I was vacationing in Chicago, the city that beat out L.A. last year in a bid to host the 2016 Summer Olympics.

"I said from the beginning never count Richie out," L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley at the time. "This is a man who has no peer. . . ."

By coincidence, Villaraigosa was in Chicago just before I was. I'd like to think he took a good look at the place and came home with a few ideas, but that was definitely not his main reason for being there.

What was? You guessed it. Money. His pal Daley co-hosted a June 3 fundraiser, where, if recent fundraising excursions are any indication, Villaraigosa may have picked up a pile from slobbering mugs who have had, or will have, business before the city.

But let's get back to Chicago.

I can guess what some of you are thinking: "Hey, Lopez, you live in the Mediterranean clime of Southern California, which happens to sit on the Pacific Ocean, and you vacationed on the prairie, which only thaws out long enough for a brief, steamy summer that leaves everyone praying for snow?"

Here's the deal: My wife had always wanted to take an old-fashioned Midwestern lake vacation, and we decided to squeeze in museums and other city stuff along with a trek through Michigan.

So we landed in Chicago, where folks in museums, hotels, restaurants and shops seem to have formed some kind of a pact to be helpful, polite and welcoming.

If we'd stayed more than three days, I would have had to start slapping people.

Having been to Chicago before, I know that comparisons to L.A. -- which has its own infinite charms and frankly is a far more interesting place to live -- make for an apples and oranges game. Chicago was built on a different scale and in a different era, pedestrian-friendly and transit-heavy, and it's not chopped up into indifferent municipalities with competing interests.

And to be fair, Chicago is no Emerald City, despite the presence of the yammering munchkins who run Tribune Co. While I spent most of my time in the showcase parts of town, murder was out of control on the South Side, corruption is never far removed from the inner workings and Daley has critics on everything from taxes to tact.

But why does a city that's under ice half the year have a better system of bike lanes, not to mention a bike-riding mayor, while Villaraigosa has a deputy mayor for transportation who dopes around L.A. in his Hummer?

Why has Chicago more aggressively improved full public access to lake and river, two of its greatest natural assets, while L.A. never gets anywhere with river development and didn't have the sense or leadership to build a western rail line all the way to the airport, let alone the beach, despite crippling traffic?

Why was Daley able to take over all of his city's ailing schools while a beaten-back Villaraigosa, after promising something grand, had to settle for a measly few campuses?

With a whole lot of help from his police chief, Villaraigosa has done reasonably well on cops and crime, and he's got a decent dream of making L.A. green, particularly at the port.

But his self-induced loss of momentum, along with funding shortages and a City Council that never veers from its quest for mediocrity, have conspired to knock the shine off Antonio's Holy Card smile.

Ron Kaye, the former L.A. Daily News editor, was born in Chicago and went to school there and, on a recent return visit, was struck by the same contrasts that were so obvious to me.

"There always has been an establishment in Chicago that had a greater sense of purpose than just getting rich or self-aggrandizing, so you have great works that came about," Kaye said.

Chicago has smarter corruption than L.A., Kaye said, because it's a strain of graft that gets things done rather than just lining pockets.

For better and worse, the dictatorial Daley family has been unafraid to reward friends and punish enemies and has used its power to keep the machine in line all the way down to ward heelers and block captains.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating a system of corrupt machine politics for Los Angeles. But is it too much to ask for a mayor capable of both inspiring and muscling people to create a better city?

In the absence of leadership, Kaye has embarked on the least rewarding of all L.A. challenges -- leading a public revolt. He's promoting a July 14 rally at City Hall for something that's being called the Saving L.A. Project.

"The slogan is to take back Los Angeles, to demand a great city," he said. "There's a group of community activists who want great bike paths and great schools and want to live in a great city that's the equal of our climate."

OK, I'm all for revolution.

But at least for a while, couldn't we work out an exchange program in which we trade Villaraigosa for Daley and see what happens?

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