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You Snooze, You Lose

Conrad Black claims that if he has to pay back Hollinger International, Jim Thompson should too.

By Michael Miner

There was a time when Jim Thompson must have admired Conrad Black's chutzpah. The ex-governor joined the board of Hollinger International back in 1994, and he surely wouldn't have stayed if he'd been offended by chairman Black's arrogance and bravado. The makeup of the board Black chose—Thompson, Henry Kissinger, and Richard Perle, among others—reflected Black the man, not the marginally profitable chain of newspapers he'd put together.

But that was then. In the last year and a half Black and his sidekick David Radler lost control of Hollinger, which is now in court trying to recover hundreds of millions of dollars it accuses them of raking off. Thompson himself has been impugned. While the top brass "were treating Hollinger like their private piggy bank," alleged a shareholder suit filed by Cardinal Value Equity Partners, the board—in particular Thompson's audit committee—was "totally quiescent," closing its eyes to the "unfettered raid on Hollinger's finances."

In May, Black made a spectacular legal move. He, Radler, and three other defendants argued in a complaint filed in federal court that if they're found liable in the Hollinger suit—"despite all the evidence to the contrary"—Thompson and the two other audit committee members should help pay off the debt. Didn't Thompson, as head of the committee, meet annually with Radler to discuss Black's and Radler's management fees (which Hollinger now denounces as a boondoggle)? Didn't Thompson then submit the fees Radler had proposed to the full committee for approval, and didn't the committee always say yes? Of course

Black and Radler assumed the fees were fair—they'd "reasonably relied on the Audit Committee's unanimous approval."

Likewise, the "Audit Committee was deficient in reviewing and approving International's asset sales, related non-compete payments and other transactions"—all of them being devices that Radler and Black allegedly used to sack the company. Black and Radler "had a right to rely in good faith" on the judgment of the committee members, for these were matters within their "professional or expert competence."

The complaint is a gleaming example of Black's brazen wit. He recasts Thompson, a former prosecutor, as the trusted elder whose duty was to keep the company on the straight and narrow but played the enabler instead.

Last week Thompson and the other two audit committee members, Marie-Josée Kravis and Richard Burt, filed a response to Black's complaint. They called it "legal nonsense" and compared it to a "complaint by a group of (alleged) bank robbers, sued by the bank to recover the loot, seeking to keep part of the loot by obtaining 'contribution' from a bank guard who (allegedly) failed to stop the robbery."

That's a pretty good analogy. I'll make it even better. The bank guard not only failed to stop the robbery but picked up the robbers at home and drove them to the bank, never noticing that they were masked and carrying guns.

Like everyone else, Thompson and the other audit committee members admit to nothing, but they argue that if they owe anyone it's Hollinger, and they've already settled. According to a tentative agreement worked out in May in the shareholder suit, Hollinger's outside directors will



MIKE WERNER

repay the company \$50 million. That's serious asleep-at-the-switch money, but it'll come from Hollinger's insurers, not the directors' own pockets.

But Hello Beautiful! Is Safe?

WBEZ sank half a million dollars a year and a chunk of its prestige into *Odyssey*, a daily talk show hosted by Gretchen Helfrich whose selling points were thoughtfulness and civility. Less than four years after it was

launched nationally, 30 stations around the country were carrying *Odyssey*, and just the other day the show was picked up in Washington, D.C.

But on June 30 the executive committee of the WBEZ board met, and later that day Helfrich was notified that WBEZ had decided to pull the plug. The board felt that the station could find something better to do with its money. Helfrich knew about the meeting and was worried, but not that worried. "I thought we might be told the board expressed concerns," she told me, "but I never thought I'd hear we'd been cut."

And that's not all. WBEZ is also

dropping *Schadenfreude*, its two-year-old Saturday afternoon comedy show. And *Stories on Stage*, which has been around since 1993, is going on what general manager Torey Malatia is calling a one-year hiatus.

In a July 6 memo to WBEZ's staff, board members, and Community Advisory Council members, Malatia said production of *Odyssey* will end on September 30 and of *Schadenfreude* on August 31. "We own considerable archives of both which may continue to be broadcast for a short time after live production ends," he wrote, and added that Ron Jones, the vice president for pro-

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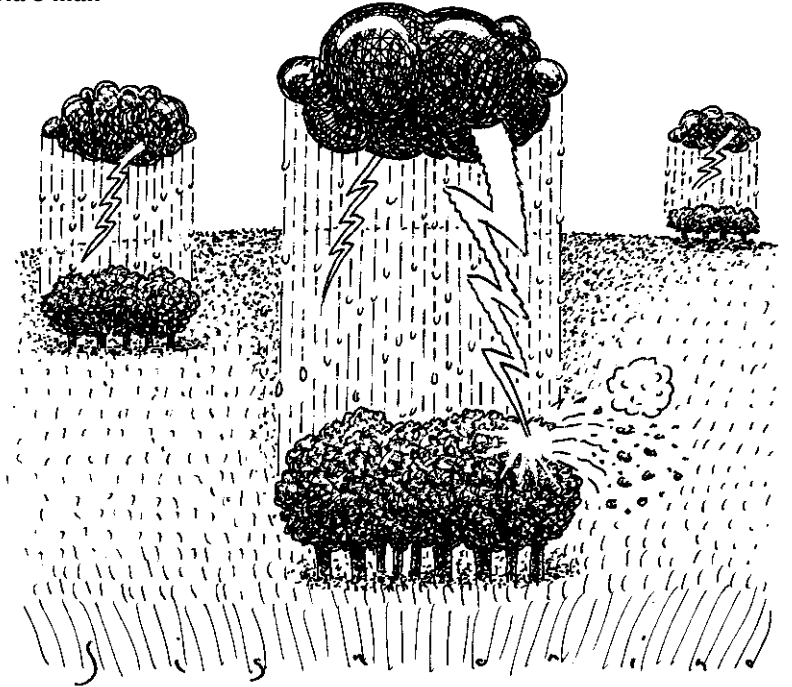
Why don't trees grow on the Great Plains? If there's enough rain and sun to grow grass, what's stopping the forest from taking over, say, Kansas? —workerant, via e-mail

Persons of the urban smarty-pants persuasion are now thinking: Duh. Everybody knows that if you have a little rain, you can grow little plants; if you have a lot of rain, you can grow big plants. The Great Plains are dry, so of course all that grows there is grass.

Except it's not that simple, you knuckleheads. True, the plains themselves—anything west of Omaha, roughly—are too arid to support trees. But that doesn't explain the “prairie peninsula.” By this we mean the immense wedge of grassland that extends eastward from the Great Plains through Iowa and Illinois, over parts of Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin, and into western Indiana, with isolated patches in Michigan and Ohio. In terms of average annual rainfall, this area, or at least the eastern end of it, doesn't differ significantly from the regions to the immediate north, south, and east, which prior to European settlement were dense woods. Trees can and do grow in the peninsula—the Illinois prairie, for example, was originally 30 percent trees, mostly clustered along riverbanks and in scattered groves. The rest, though, consisted of grasses reaching 10 to 12 feet in height, and for that reason the region is classified as tallgrass prairie, the characteristic grassland east of the 98th meridian.

So while the popular portrayal of blinking pioneers emerging from the forest primeval to behold an uninterrupted sea of grass is a bit exaggerated, the change in vegetation was sufficiently abrupt that many were moved to wonder: What gives? Some guesses:

- ▶▶ *It's too dry.* Not true on average, as I say, but—key distinction—true episodically, a matter to which I'll return.
- ▶▶ *The soil won't support trees.* A plausible but completely wrong idea that caused many early settlers to bypass some of the most fertile land in the world to reach the distant forests of Oregon. (Granted, the prairie was a bear to cultivate prior to John Deere's invention of the self-scouring steel plow in 1837.) It's now reasonably well established that prairie soil is not the cause but the result of prairie vegetation.
- ▶▶ *The trees were blown down by the wind.* We'll pass silently by this conjecture, attributed to newspaper editor Horace Greeley, except to say that the prevailing westerlies do have something to do with the matter.



SLUGG SIGNORINO

▶▶ *The Indians burned down the forest.* Seemingly another dumbass idea, but actually an important part of the truth.

The real story, or so it now seems, emerged piecemeal over a century and may rightly be regarded as one of the triumphs of the science of ecology. The question was squarely framed and partly answered in a classic 1935 paper entitled “The Prairie Peninsula,” by botanist Edgar Transeau. Numerous others have made important contributions since, as summarized in a 2003 paper by weather scientists Stanley Changnon, Ken Kunkel, and Derek Winstanley. The chief factors:

- ▶▶ *Drought.* Notwithstanding relatively plentiful average rainfall, the prairie peninsula suffers from severe drought 50 to 200 percent more often than the surrounding forests.
- ▶▶ *Dry season.* In contrast to forest regions, which have relatively uniform precipitation throughout the year, the prairie peninsula is noticeably drier in late fall and winter.
- ▶▶ *High ratio of evaporation to precipitation.* A key insight of Transeau's, this one gets a little technical, but the main idea is that despite abundant rain, plants dry out faster in the prairie peninsula due to wind, temperature, and so on.

▶▶ *Flat terrain.* The prairie offered few natural barriers and particularly—you see where I'm going with this—few natural firebreaks.

▶▶ *Lightning.* After Florida and the Gulf Coast, the prairie peninsula has electrical storms more often than any other region in the U.S.

▶▶ *Fire.* There seems little question that recurring fire promoted by periodic dry spells was the central formative feature of the prairie. How the majority of fires got started remains a matter of debate. Native Americans evidently torched the prairie frequently to create more desirable grazing land for game. Other blazes were started by lightning, which often struck the highest thing around, namely the trees. Whatever their cause, the fires were certainly dramatic, racing across the prairie at speeds of up to 15 to 20 kilometers per hour and incinerating vast tracts. Forests were slow to recover from the destruction, but prairie grasses, whose seeds and buds remained cool a few inches below the scorched surface, were back the next year. Grasses, in short, thrived because they were better adapted to the stressful prairie environment than trees, surviving everything except civilization's appetite for arable land.

Comments, questions? Take it up with Cecil on the Straight Dope Message Board, www.straightdope.com, or write him at the Chicago Reader, 11 E. Illinois, Chicago 60611. Cecil's most recent compendium of knowledge, *Triumph of the Straight Dope*, is available at bookstores everywhere.

gramming, was working up local shows to replace them.

Odyssey's success in other cities made that show seem more prosperous than it was. “Carriage revenue is relatively low,” Helfrich explained. “Shows don't usually rake in big carriage fees until they're huge hits.”

Which the board decided *Odyssey* would never be? I wondered.

“Either that,” she said, “or they weren't willing to give it time to happen. This is pretty sudden. This is not at all how I would have expected it to happen. But the board, the station, is entirely within its rights. I can't act all outraged.”

Justin Kaufmann, executive producer of *Schadenfreude*, told me cancellation “says Chicago Public Radio may not be the place for this kind of experimental comedy.” He always felt Malatia was behind him. He never thought the board was.

Don't Judge the Criticism by the Critics

In Chicago it's been one media scandal after another. Peter LaBarbera just accused the local media of “violating all the rules of impartiality in covering controversial issues.” Debbie Schlusel just jeered that “in his zeal to call me a ‘creep,’ Chicago Sun-Times sports ‘columnist’ Ron Rapoport invented and attributed to me a quote I never wrote or uttered.”

If only these accusations were totally false.

Consider LaBarbera's first. He's executive director of the Illinois Family Institute, which is based in Glen Ellyn and exists to defend “marriage, the natural family and the sanctity of life.” In his view,

“Homosexual behavior will always be wrong—no matter how many ‘pride’ parades are held or how powerful the ‘gay’ lobby becomes.”

So how is it, he wonders, that Chicago's media can claim even-handed coverage of the Gay Pride parade when they have floats in it? I'm not sure Chicago's media make any such claim, but that's not to say they shouldn't be able to. I said to him, is it like a radio station having a float in the Cinco de Mayo parade but having no time for anybody who advocates shipping all these people back to Tijuana?

“Ethnic- and racial-heritage parades are by and large noncontroversial,” said LaBarbera.

“There's a huge societal split on the issue of homosexuality.”

Not in Chicago, I said.

There's more to Illinois than Chicago, he said.

The Illinois Family Institute Web site bubbled with activity in the days before the June 26 parade. One headline fretted: “Will It Happen Again This Year? IFI's LaBarbera Filmed Homosexual Men Committing Lewd Act Directly in Front of Police Line at 2004 Chicago ‘Pride’ Parade. Warning: Graphic Description Follows.”

The morning of the parade LaBarbera fired off a news release announcing that he was available “to provide another viewpoint.” But his cell phone didn't ring.

“No media called for another viewpoint,” his Web site admitted the next day, “and the *Chicago Tribune* and *Sun-Times* both included only homosexuality-affirming voices in their stories.”

I called LaBarbera and said it was unusual for an organization to let the world know it had issued a news release everyone ignored. “We didn't want to telegraph our impotence,” he

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explained, "but we did want to telegraph to the media that there are two sides to this issue."

Then there's Debbie Schlusel. She's a blogger, online columnist, and Fox TV personality whom Ron Rapoport had somehow never heard of despite her appearances on Howard Stern. Schlusel was outraged at the way the *Sun-Times* sports columnist had misrepresented her. On June 22 he wrote: "OK, who's the bigger creep? Formula One boss Bernie Ecclestone, who said women in racing like [Danica] Patrick should be 'dressed in white like all the other domestic appliances,' or conservative commentator Debbie Schlusel, who wrote, 'Patrick

looks like a woman, as opposed to the 169 players in the WNBA, who look like men.' In case you didn't get what Schlusel was driving at, she labeled her piece 'Lesbian Basketball, Season 9 vs. the Indy Chick.'"

Rapoport hadn't actually read Schlusel's commentary, which appeared online on June 1. "I made a mistake," he told me. He'd read a column in the *Arizona Republic* by the WNBA's Kayte Christensen, who was responding to what she called Schlusel's "idiotcy and insults." Christensen had quoted the title of Schlusel's piece accurately, but she'd paraphrased the rest of it, writing, "According to Schlusel . . . the difference between WNBA players and Patrick is that

Patrick looks like a woman, as opposed to the 169 players in the WNBA, who look like men." Rapoport carelessly attributed this paraphrase to Schlusel.

Here's what Schlusel actually wrote: "What's the difference between the WNBA and Danica Patrick? For one thing, she looks like a woman, and they don't." For those of you curious about Schlusel's thought processes, here's more: "Take a look at the raven-haired, petite Patrick with her long tresses," she went on. "Then, look at the 7'2" Margo Dydek of Connecticut's WNBA team—if you dare. Which one would guys rather date? Which one would most young girls rather be like when they grow up?"

Hint: They aren't making a scale version of Dydek Barbie anytime soon. Dyslexic young girls might unscramble the letters of her surname and get the right idea of what the WNBA is really about."

Schlusel e-mailed Rapoport demanding a retraction. What she got was a wretchedly worded correction on June 24 that said a "quote attributed to commentator Debbie Schlusel . . . should have been attributed to Phoenix Mercury forward Kayte Christensen." The *Sun-Times* was fortunate not to hear from Christensen's lawyers.

If Schlusel—who didn't answer my e-mail—spotted the correction she didn't acknowledge it. Her last word online was: "****UPDATE: After an e-mail to Rapoport point-

ing out that he fabricated and plagiarized his column, attributing a quote to me that I NEVER uttered or wrote, Rapoport has the *chutzpah* to ask me to send him the column. What am I—his researcher? Call me a 'creep,' do your own research, lazy writer."

It's not that Schlusel can't take criticism. On her blog site, readers tear into her. "If you are a woman, you're a disgrace to our gender," one posted. Another said, "Very offensive and very shallow." A third said, "If Danica Patrick is even one-half the woman I think she is, she will demand you take her name out of your pathetic, sexist, homophobic diatribe."

Schlusel kept her silence. But she won't sit still for inaccuracy. **B**



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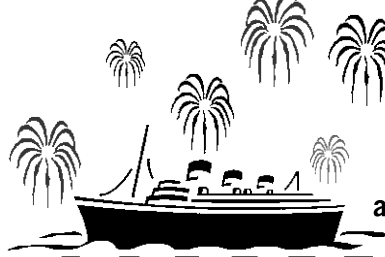
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