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Bill Singer: Political maverick now practices law of clout

By Paul Galloway

Bill Singer looks terrific these days—trim, well-tailored, prosperous. At 44 he never has been in better health. Almost every morning he jogs in Lincoln Park, and last fall he went the distance in the Chicago marathon.

He weighs 150 pounds, which is 30 pounds less than he weighed a decade ago when he was alderman of the 43d Ward and, as the standard-bearer for the city's independent movement, became the final candidate to challenge Richard J. Daley, who was seeking an unprecedented sixth term as mayor.

Singer was a political wunderkind who in 1969, as a 29-year-old novice, had upset the Daley machine in a special North Side aldermanic election. Three years later he and the Rev. Jesse Jackson led a group of insurgents in a bitter dispute over seats to the Democratic National Convention, successfully replacing Daley and

his delegates.

For most realists Singer was just another sacrificial lamb, but for many liberals the 1975 mayoral race was the match-up they had been waiting for: It was David against Goliath, right versus wrong, the sunlight of reform breaking through the dark clouds of patronage, the future versus the

past.

Except that, as expected, it came out differently from the original version. This time Goliath decked David. It wasn't even close, something like 2-to-1. It was the first election Singer had lost, and it was to be Daley's last hurrah. Within two

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Tribune photo by Bob Fila

Former independent alderman Bill Singer: "I do believe more today in the necessity and the role of the private sector."

Bill Singer now running with City Hall insiders

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years he was dead.

Much, to put it mildly, has happened since. There have been new alignments, great upheavals and stunning surprises. Two reform candidates have been elected mayor since Daley's death, and neither has been William S. Singer.

He has always been a presence, and an influential one, has always been active, but in the years since his defeat by Daley he has changed more than his weight, in 1980 making a decision that startled some people and sharply altered the course of his career.

He joined Kirkland & Ellis, with its 300 lawyers one of the largest and most successful law firms in the nation and a symbol of establishment influence. He is a partner there, representing, among others, some very large, very successful corporate clients.

Says Singer: "When it happened, half the people said, 'My God, how could Bill Singer go to Kirkland & Ellis?' And the other half said, 'My God, how could Kirkland & Ellis take Bill Singer?'"

in the social set with the liberal percrust. He developed a high-lying style. For the last five or six years, he's liked playing both sides."

Leon Despres, a former independent alderman from the South Side who served in the City Council with Singer, sees no abandonment of principles, no defection.

"I think he was and is a liberal Democrat of high ideals," Despres says. "It's just that he decided to go with a big law firm and engage in a big-time legal practice. He's in the tradition of a number of liberal Democratic lawyers who have chosen that very lucrative path. I've known a number of outstanding people in this category."

"I think it's a question of appraisal and the expectations people had for Bill. I think some people who express disappointment with him thought he would end up representing labor or perhaps something on that order, but that was never his style. Bill is a very, very bright person, a very able person, but he was never a revolutionary."

Jack Guthman, the chairman of the Chicago Zoning Board of Appeals, has known Singer for many years and, as he, is associated with a large law firm.

"I have a lot of respect for Bill Singer," Guthman says. "I'm not critical of him for any relationships he may develop. I think he's making a contribution to society. He's continued to work toward the same political and societal goals he's always had."

"It may be in a different way than when he began his career, but to me this is a credit. I say this while I'm sitting in an office at Sidley & Austin in the First National Bank Building, but to me Singer has shown that he's been able to adapt to a real-world situation without giving up his concerns and ideals. I'm much more critical of his detractors. I think some of them are more concerned with process and ideology than practical results."

Singer, as a member of a small, embattled band of independent aldermen who fought for truth and justice against the Daley hordes in City Council, made many headlines in the '70s. He still makes the papers in the '80s, but he no longer is cast in the old role as idealistic underdog, struggling against superior odds. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Last Feb. 8 on the op-ed page of The Tribune, Marilyn Preston, a TV critic for this newspaper, suggested that the Singer-Vrdolyak combination may have engineered "the old bait-and-switch" scheme by drawing up a model cable TV proposal, gaining approval for it, then substituting one that favors the cable industry.

Singer's endorsement of Jane Byrne instead of Harold Washington in the 1983 mayoralty race was duly noted in the press, some pundits seeing it as a disavowal of reform standards. Black columnist Vernon Jarrett called Singer's action yet another example in his long pattern of betrayal of blacks.

Last year Singer took some heat for the smoke-detector ordinance he wrote for Vrdolyak. A Tribune article, headlined "Smoke alert bill could aid Singer," reported that he had drafted the ordinance requiring residential smoke detectors for Vrdolyak, who introduced it, while at the same time serving as an attorney for an Aurora company that makes detectors and would profit from the law.

This prompted Don Rose to sad-

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The result has been a transformation from political maverick to power broker, from an outsider at City Hall to a well-connected insider who has considerable clout on a number of issues.

One is cable television. As head of an independent study commission on cable TV, Singer was instrumental in drafting the city's highly praised guidelines, and he remains in a highly important position as chairman of the Cable Access Corp., which, with a guaranteed budget of \$1 million a year from cable franchise holders, has jurisdiction over public-access channels and programming.

At City Hall his main clout is Ald. Edward Vrdolyak [10th], a political opponent from the Daley days and arch-villain for many of Singer's former allies.

They are an unlikely, but effective, duo, having worked together on several ordinances, two of the most notable of which are a bill mandating residential smoke detectors and the cable TV legislation. They are close friends, talking regularly, arguing, offering advice, each probably trying to use the other.

Some of the old troops in the army of reform are downright shell-shocked by this alliance. In 10 years of surprises Singer has become one of the biggest. It's as though David not only had defected to the Philistines but also, even worse, had become buddy-buddy with Goliath himself, today's Goliath being, of course, Vrdolyak.

One such former comrade is James Chapman, state chairman of the Independent Voters of Illinois-Independent Precinct Organization and a supporter of Mayor Washington.

"I go back to 1968 with Bill," Chapman says. "If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have had the involvement I've had with independent politics. I still consider him a friend. I have fond and deep memories, but now we find ourselves on extremely different sides of the political fence. I wish he weren't with Vrdolyak, which clearly splits us philosophically."

Another former supporter is Don Rose, a left-liberal-reform political operative and consultant, whose assessment of Singer is harsh.

"I think Bill Singer is one of the clearest examples of a sellout," Rose says. "When he moved to Kirkland & Ellis he began to get a taste of power and money. After his mayoralty defeat he was still riding high and still looked on as the leader of the independent movement, but he began to move

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dle Singer with "The Jane Byrne Award for Rancid Reformers" in Rose's political column in the Reader. Rose wrote that Singer had insisted that Vrdolyak, not another alderman of lesser standing, introduce the smoke-alarm bill to assure its passage and noted that Singer soon after had endorsed Richard M. Daley, Vrdolyak's candidate for state's attorney, over Ald. Larry Bloom [5th], the independent candidate.

Recently, seated on a couch in his office in the Standard Oil Building, Singer talked about his new life, his old principles and the various political and ideological sins he may or may not have committed.

"I haven't changed. If I were still alderman in my ward, I'd feel the same about the same issues."

He was asked if he considered himself a power broker.

"I don't regard that as a negative term. Some people, I think, equate it with corruption. I don't. I'm happy to have the chance to get things done that I believe in."

Singer may be tainted by financial well-being.

"I suppose some people distrust success. Some people may think I'm rich because I'm with a big law firm. I'm doing well, but I've got a big mortgage, and I'm not rich."

"I think part of the problem with the way some people see me today is that I was always perceived as being on the outside when I was an alderman, and now when this former outsider can deal with insiders, some see it as a sellout. But that's silly. I'm not selling out anything, and the fact is I was never on the outside when I was in City Council."

"I always had good relations with Daley and his people. I liked Daley. When I was elected Daley called me in and told me, 'We're going to have our differences, but I'll never deny you anything for your people.' He was true to his word. No ward had any better



Tribune photo by Michael Budrys

Bill Singer campaigning for mayor against Richard Daley in 1975.

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—Bill Singer

services."

Asked about his relationship with Vrdolyak, Singer said, "He and I have been friends since my days in City Council. We've always gotten along, even when we were on opposite sides. He told me in 1975 that he was going to help Daley beat my brains out, and he did. But he was one of the first people to make a contribution to pay off my campaign deficit.

"We could always talk. We always had an ability to step back from an issue we disagreed on and talk from a position of mutual respect. I give him lots of advice, although he doesn't always take it. We still have an agreement to disagree. I am one of his advisers, and there is nothing wrong with that."

Singer is resigned to the criticisms about the renegotiated cable contracts.

"By now, I know you get shot at, no matter what you do. We've produced for Chicago the best possible system. It is free of any taint or lawsuits, and that hasn't happened in any city.

"We have a clean, honest, state-of-the-art system, and we're going

to have it in less time than most cities. It's fair to say we didn't get what we wanted to get, and there will always be people who say you didn't get enough. There are limits; it comes down to who is going to pay."

Singer said that cable companies had overestimated revenues greatly when they made their initial bids for franchises, something that has happened everywhere. In city after city, companies have reduced their projections and renegotiated contracts or sold their franchises to other companies.

His endorsement of Byrne, Singer said, was part of a bargain he struck after she allowed him to draft the cable TV guidelines free of any political interference.

"I went to her through Eddie, and she said she'd stay out of it. After we wrote the law she called and said, 'I've lived up to my promise. I hope now you can endorse me.'"

Singer did, and Byrne appointed him as head of Cable Access Corp.

"The 1983 race was far from a test of principles," he said. "It's fair to note that a lot of independents were divided among Byrne and Washington and Richie Daley."

Singer is unapologetic about his part in the smoke-detector ordinance. It happened, he said, after a client whose company manufactured detectors called and asked why Chicago didn't have a mandatory law like other cities.

Singer called Vrdolyak.

"Ed said there was no ordinance because detectors were tied into building codes in a very complicated way. I asked if it were possible to pass a law mandating them, and he said no.

"Almost immediately there was a fire in a small hotel on Dearborn, and some people were killed. I called Eddie and said now the time was right, and he said to go ahead and draft a law. And I *did* insist that Vrdolyak introduce it to assure that it would pass. Of course it was self-serving for my client, but I think it's also in the public interest. It has already saved lives."

If he has changed at all in his philosophy, it is more a matter of emphasis.

"I *do* believe more today in the necessity and the role of the private sector. In '75 I stressed jobs, schools and city financing. In '85 it's clear that the mechanism that makes the wheel go 'round is business and jobs. The long-term issues are dependent on the economic base of the city. That's the key issue."

He sounds like a candidate. Would he run for office again?

"Probably not," he said.

Probably not?

"I wouldn't foreclose all options."