



Illinois budget crisis: lots of scorched earth, no smell of victory



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A Reboot Original

"I love the smell of napalm in the morning.... Smelled like . . . victory."

Lt. Col. Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall), "Apocalypse Now"

The Illinois budget crisis for the last few weeks has had me thinking about one of the [most famous pieces of dialogue](#) in American movie history.

Spoken about 50 minutes into Francis Ford Coppola's iconic 1979 Vietnam drama "Apocalypse Now," the lines from Lt. Col. William "Bill" Kilgore (Robert Duvall) convey a perverse view of pride in destruction and destruction as victory. Kilgore finishes it off with a closing observation delivered dripping with ambiguity: "Someday this war's gonna end."

To Kilgore, today's destruction is merely an antecedent to tomorrow's victory. Those defoliated hills eventually will be green again. The displaced villagers will start over somewhere else. And, in his mind, they'll thank him for all this. Someday.

I couldn't help but think of Duvall's famous speech as I gathered reactions to Attorney General Lisa Madigan's [Jan. 26 motion](#) that, if successful, would halt payment of state employees until Gov. Bruce Rauner and the Illinois General Assembly enact a state

budget to authorize it. (Madigan [lost Round 1](#) in court last week but is appealing the decision.)

Because Illinois has not had a true budget in place since July 1, 2015, its nine state universities have received only limited and sporadic payment since then. As things stand **now, they're in line to see** their state funding fall by more than half over the past two years. Dozens of social service providers who hold contracts with the state to care for the **disabled, sick, elderly and others have been stiffed because they can't be paid without** budget authorization. The state [owes \\$12.4 billion](#) in back bills and is months behind in payment.

With neither the spending controls that a budget would enact nor additional taxes to boost state revenue, Illinois state government has been adrift since summer 2015. Court orders and other legal mechanisms meant that 90 percent of FY 2015 spending has continued ever since, even though the state takes in far less income tax revenue today than it did back then.

But rather than see the attorney general's motion as a call to action to fix all this dysfunction, lawmakers on both sides scrambled to win support for measures that would **extend it. Democrats in the Illinois House, led by Rauner's arch political rival**, House Speaker Michael Madigan, have introduced a bill to keep state employees paid through the current fiscal year, which ends June 30. Republicans, joined by Rauner, want a measure that would make state employee payroll immune from the budget process forever.

Those universities who are now losing students to colleges in other states? Those social service providers now laying off staff and cutting programs for the sick, disabled and **elderly? In the logic of Col. Kilgore, they'll be better off someday because**, if Rauner prevails, Illinois will be rewarded sometime in the future with a booming economy.

Conversely, if Speaker Madigan prevails, they'll be better off because Rauner will have been thwarted.

Rauner last week introduced a budget plan that was, by any sane definition, at least \$4.6 billion in the red. While tossing out some compliments to state senators who are working on a true budget framework, Rauner also let it be known, again, that he's not backing down on his calls for reforms including term limits. Likewise, Democrats dug in, accusing Rauner of shirking his constitutional duty to present a balanced budget.

As this was happening, the Illinois Republican Party added a spiffy new [JibJab-style video](#) to its [bossmadigan.com](#) site while I heard two Democrats last week publicly deride Rauner as having policies similar to those of Donald Trump. All of this strikes me less as outrageous than as juvenile.

And they also strike me as coming from combatants for whom, like Col. Kilgore, destroying the enemy at any cost has supplanted any more worthy goal that existed at the start of the conflict.

I'll leave it to you to cast your own Kilgore — Rauner, Madigan or perhaps both — in Illinois' ongoing fiscal apocalypse. To paraphrase Robert Duvall, someday this budget impasse is gonna end. And it's quite possible that either Rauner or Madigan will claim a victory in vanquishing his rival.

And the rest of us lowly taxpayers who'll eventually foot the bill for these past two years? We'll get a damaged higher education system, a frayed social service safety net and billions in bills owed. It'll smell for sure, but not like but victory.