Pay To Play: the fall of Rod Blagojevich

In Sunday's Sun, Cornell University professor Glenn C. Altschuler reviews **Pay To Play: the fall of Rod Blagojevich** by Elizabeth Brackett (Ivan R. Dee / 247 pages / $24.95). Here's an excerpt from the review:

While a grand jury was investigating him, Blagojevich was preparing to run for president of the United States. He thought he'd make universal health care and the importation of low-cost prescription drugs from Canada his signature issues. And he began to ramp up his fundraising operations. His ability as governor of Illinois to confer contracts to wealthy individuals and companies, he emphasized, made it easier "to solicit people for contributions."

According to Brackett, a correspondent for PBS' NewsHour With Jim Lehrer, Blagojevich's plans were eclipsed by Barack Obama's race to the White House. They came crashing down when U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald alleged that the governor was involved in a "political corruption crime spree" that would "make Lincoln roll over in his grave."

In **Pay To Play**, Brackett provides a lively account of the tragi-comedy that culminated in the governor's impeachment. She pays particular attention to the shocking traditions of corruption in Illinois politics that served as a model for Blagojevich.

Since 1974, in fact, three governors have served time in prison. Brackett also demonstrates as well that the sale of Obama's vacant Senate seat to the highest bidder was by no means the only — or the worst — of his crimes against the citizens of the state.

Illinois' lax campaign finance laws, Brackett argues, paved the way for pay-to-play. The legislation sets no restrictions on contributions and allows unlimited donations from individuals and groups. Only this year did a new ethics law bar anyone doing business with the state from making a contribution. 

Introduced to shakedowns, side-deals and no-show jobs early in his career, Brackett writes, Blagojevich, "who loved politics but hated to govern," was nothing if not brazen. He threatened to impound $8 million in state funds for pediatric physicians until Patrick Magoon, the CEO of Chicago's Children's Memorial Hospital, added $50,000 to his campaign war chest. ... 

Blagojevich's wife, Patti, Brackett indicates, was up to her eyeballs in corruption as well. A licensed real estate broker and the daughter of Rod's mentor, Alderman Dick Mell, she received hundreds of thousands of dollars in commissions from political supporters, fundraising and contractors, including the soon-to-be notorious Tony Rezko.

And so, no one was surprised when the Illinois Senate voted 59-0 to remove Blagojevich from office. ...