

Interview with Ann Lousin

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: There's one other prominent Illinois politician we haven't mentioned here yet, except in passing, perhaps, and that's Barack Obama, who emerged from semi-obscure in 2004.

Lousin: (laughs) Well, I've never met him or his wife. People say, "Well, you run in the same circles; you must have met." I said, "I think I would remember shaking hands with somebody named Barack Obama. It's not exactly John Smith, you know." But I've never met them.

Certainly, I know a lot of people who are mutual friends. It's an extraordinary story, really. I'm not sure what his legacy is going to be. However, it is, of course, remarkable, that he took the path of going to the Harvard Law School, becoming the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*, and then completely turned his back—

DePue: President or editor?

Lousin: No, oddly enough, at Harvard they call it the president of the *Harvard Law Review*. That's their thing. Everybody on the Harvard faculty wanted to get him a clerkship with one of the federal appellate judges, and then see if they could get him into a United States Supreme Court clerkship. There are relatively few black clerks. There are now a lot of women clerks. That was true by 1991, when he graduated. There were getting to be a lot more women.

Oh, there are plenty of graduates of Harvard, on the United States Supreme Court. They made an effort, and he said, “No, I’m coming back to Chicago. I’m going to work in...” They thought it was back to community organizing? Good grief. Well, he went with a civil rights firm, but then started teaching as a lecturer in law, at the University of Chicago.

Now, here we are all trying to get really good, first class minorities and women out front, you know? He says, “No, I’m not going to do it.” And he said, “I’m in a hurry. I’m not going to take two more years out of my life by being a judicial clerk.” Now that’s an extraordinary thing to say. It showed how really ambitious he was, as a politician. Then he came back here.

I understand that he was the only president of the *Harvard Law Review* who had never published a case note or a comment, when he was on the *Law Review*. That, I think, indicates somebody who is very cautious. He doesn’t want something in writing that could follow him later on, although god knows, most publications in law reviews are on highly technical topics. I doubt very much that anybody would be terribly interested in what he had to say on an administrative law procedure, twenty years later, when he ran for office. He didn’t want to put anything in writing.

Everybody says he was a professor of law at the University of Chicago. No, he was not. He was lecturer in law. It was well after my time, but I know that title. Basically, he was an adjunct, very well liked, generally, but it meant that he was not really part of the administration, the faculty governance of the law school, and he never had to publish anything.

So, basically, he's never done any scholarly work. Yes, he's published two sort of autobiographical works. But he has not really published anything in the way of political or legal research. He's a very circumspect man, and I really don't know what to make of that.

DePue: How do you explain his relative obscurity in the Illinois Senate, and then rocketing to fame?

Lousin: Everything I've heard was, he did not have the world's best attendance record. He never tried out for leadership, or, at least, he wasn't successful in that. I've seen that list that Blagojevich kept, of all the prominent people, who asked him to appoint someone in a job. Remember, the *Chicago Sun Times* did a FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] request and got that?

Blagojevich kept that from 2003 to 2005, when he stopped, probably because of the federal investigation. Of course, I got it, and I got it on the computer disk. The first name I looked for—because it's indexed several ways, by the person who is being recommended, by the person who's doing the recommending—the first name I looked for was my own, because I'd written a number of references for my students, over the years. I thought, oh my god, did I happen to write anything? The answer was, no; my name is not on the list. But then I went down. The person with more references than anybody else, I mean, who recommended more people, was Dick Mell, like over a hundred of them. Then there weren't quite—

DePue: His father in-law.

Lousin: Yeah, his father-in-law. And then comes Mike Madigan. Okay, you could figure, okay. And then I went down the list, I said, "My god, there's a half dozen to a dozen people...It says, State Senator Barack Obama. He recommended people.

In one case, there's a notation, "This post does not exist; we would have to create it." I thought, oh, that's amusing. It's along the line of, well, I wonder if what Obama was saying was, find a job somewhere in this agency for this person, even if you have to create the job. I have no idea what the background here was, but it was interesting. He'd occasionally recommend somebody for the Blagojevich Administration. That was it.

He doesn't seem to have had a hand in major legislation. The story I've heard was that he was part of the Wednesday night poker club and that he was a very cautious poker player, which pleases me.

DePue: When did he come to your attention? Was it at the 2004 Democratic Convention?

Lousin: No, just a little bit before that. I was very, very irritated at what happened. During the redistricting, in 2001, he was allowed to indicate what he wanted in his district, and to a certain extent, he could get his own way.

He put in a preference, and he said he wanted to have, not only Hyde Park and the surrounding areas, but he would go up the lakefront and come into where I live, in Streeterville. Well, I've never before known a redistricting that put the Streeterville area, which is to say north of the Chicago River, in the

same legislative district with all those people down in South Commons and Hyde Park.

DePue: This is the Illinois—

Lousin: The Illinois state Senate and representative district, because they're coterminous, two reps and one senator.

DePue: Right.

Lousin: And I started checking it out. I said, "How did I end up with Hyde Park, as my neighbor, here in the district?" They said "Well, the state senator wants it." I said, "Who?" I had never heard of him.

Then came the fact, in 2002, he had no opposition; there was no Republican opponent. I didn't know this guy. I thought I might get a postcard, "Dear constituent, I know I am running unopposed, so it's highly probable I will be your next state senator. I am new to your area. I never represented you before, but I want you to know that I will do my best, and I earnestly solicit your support in November." Now that's pro forma, but it would have meant something.

I never got so much as a postcard, a dear constituent postcard. I thought, either he has no manners, or he has a staff that doesn't realize that, as the saying goes, "a girl likes to be asked." The same was true, generally, in my neighborhood. I said, "Did anybody hear anything from the new state senator to be?" Nobody'd heard anything.

So, when the noises started happening, in 2004—and yes, I saw that speech on TV; it was electrifying—when I started hearing noises about how he

might run, I started saying to several people, who were Obama supporters, why didn't he have the decency to send us all a note, back in 2002? I got a really dumb answer, which was, "Oh, if you want to know what his positions on things are, we could send you..." I said, "Wait a minute. He should be sending me a newsletter, not you will go find out what his positions are. I should be getting a newsletter, at least once a term, at least a postcard, back in the fall of 2002. Why does he even want Streeterville, if he's going to ignore us?"

More recently, I've heard he wanted Streeterville so that he could go and solicit a lot of money from the wealthy people there. Well, he wasn't going to get any money out of me. I'm not one of the wealthy Democrats up there. But he got money, and I thought, this is very strange, if he thinks he can ignore all of those constituents, not even send them a postcard. I was rather dismayed.