

George W. Dunne

By [Liam Ford and Joseph Sjostrom](#), Tribune staff reporters

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Former Cook County Board President George William Dunne, one of the last loyal power brokers of the 20th Century Chicago Democratic machine, died Sunday. He was 93.

Mr. Dunne's political career stretched from the early years of the modern machine under Mayor Edward J. Kelly through 2004, when Mr. Dunne retired after 43 years as the city's 42nd Ward committeeman.

He died of complications from atrial fibrillation at a farm he owned in [McHenry](#) County, according to his family.

Tall, affable and silver-haired, Mr. Dunne was president of the Cook County Board from 1969 until he retired in 1990. Many credit Mr. Dunne with holding together the Cook County [Democratic Party](#) when he assumed the mantle of county party chairman after the death of Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley in 1976.

The son of Irish immigrants, Mr. Dunne's political fortunes waxed and waned during the tumultuous years after Daley's death.

Still, Mr. Dunne outlasted and outsmarted his rivals, ending his career in charge of both the party organization and the County Board, besting those who hoped to topple him.

Often spoken of as Daley's obvious successor, Mr. Dunne said in retrospect that he probably could have been mayor if he had sought the office actively. But during the bitter infighting that followed Daley's death, Mr. Dunne emerged as chairman of the party and [Michael Bilandic](#) emerged as the new mayor.

Mr. Dunne participated as few others did in the great political developments of his time.

With vivid detail, he could recall sitting with longtime Democratic power broker Col. Jacob Arvey and the Illinois delegation on the night Harry Truman was nominated for the presidency at the 1948 Democratic convention in Philadelphia.

Twenty years later, Mr. Dunne was at Richard J. Daley's side at the tumultuous Democratic convention in Chicago, where delegates in the convention hall nominated Hubert Humphrey for president as anti-war demonstrators clashed with police in the streets of the city.

Mr. Dunne held to the old-style virtue of party loyalty but refrained from striking out against those who crossed him, politicians who knew him said.

At a 1982 meeting at which Mayor Jane Byrne and Ald. [Edward R. Vrdolyak](#) (10th) engineered Mr. Dunne's ouster as county party chairman--he later regained the post--Mr. Dunne silenced his loyalists' grumblings, said former state Senate President Philip Rock.

"George's reaction was not in any sense to have any recrimination or anger or retribution," Rock said. "He had some of his loyalists around him, and he said, 'Now, take it easy, take it easy; everything will be all right.' The meeting was, frankly, to dethrone him, and he did not want any retaliation."

When U.S. Rep. Harold Washington won the Democratic nomination for mayor in 1983, many white Democrats refused to support him. But Mr. Dunne's protege and successor as 42nd Ward committeeman, Ald. Burton Natarus (42nd), recalled Mr. Dunne's reaction to Washington's nomination.

"George said, 'I don't care who he is, we're backing the winner,'" Natarus said. "And he backed him all the way. At one of the St. Patrick's Day parades, he took Harold by the hand and took him to the head of the line."

Mr. Dunne stood out from other political leaders of his era--particularly other Irish politicians--by being a North Sider.

Mr. Dunne spent all of his life in the Near North Side's 42d Ward, growing up one of eight children of the sexton of Holy Name Cathedral. He peddled newspapers during Prohibition and got his first taste of politics in the Catholic Youth Organization.

He graduated from the De La Salle Institute on the South Side, which produced both Mayors Daley, Mayor Martin Kennelly and former County Board President Dan Ryan. Mr. Dunne attended Northwestern University, spent 42 months in the Army in World War II and did another stint in the Korean conflict.

Mr. Dunne began his career in government as a park supervisor at the Lake Shore playground when what was to be known as the Kelly-Nash Democratic machine was in its infancy. After more than two decades with the parks, Mr. Dunne left the post of assistant superintendent at the Chicago Park District to run for the [Illinois House](#) in 1955.

After being elected House majority leader in 1961, Mr. Dunne left Springfield that year at Daley's request to fill a vacancy on the County Board. He replaced Richard Ogilvie as County Board president in 1969 when Ogilvie resigned to become governor.

Mr. Dunne remained active in 42nd Ward politics until recently, holding the post of Democratic ward committeeman there from 1961 until 2004.

Political observers said that throughout his public life, Mr. Dunne maintained--with the exception of rare flashes of temper--a stately but humble demeanor.

In an interview while he was still president of the County Board, Mr. Dunne was asked to list his most notable achievements in politics. After several seconds' silence, Mr. Dunne asked his questioner, "Well, that would

almost be like blowing my own horn, wouldn't it?"

Unlike most politicians of his stature, Mr. Dunne never used bodyguards and had an open-door policy at his office, allowing almost everyone who wanted his ear to come in and talk.

He walked from his home in the 200 block of East Chestnut Street to work at the County Building in the Loop every day.

"He would carry change in his pocket so he could give money to the homeless people. And they would know to expect him," said another political protege, Ald. [Walter Burnett](#) (27th).

Despite his company, Near North Insurance Agency, receiving millions of dollars of contracts to insure government buildings and projects--contracts often awarded without competitive bidding--Mr. Dunne steadfastly refused to disclose his considerable personal wealth. He maintained that his worth was his business and had no bearing on his performance in office.

"Why should I be penalized for my success? Should I be the subject of ridicule for being the great American success story?" Mr. Dunne said.

In recent years, long after he cut his ties with the insurance firm, Near North Insurance has been plagued with more serious scandal. In 2004, the company was convicted along with Mr. Dunne's former business partner, Michael Segal, on federal mail fraud and embezzlement charges.

Mr. Dunne, nicknamed "Gentleman George" by political observers, clung to his private, mild-mannered style even in the two biggest setbacks of his political career. In 1982 he lost his chairmanship of the Democratic Party, and Cook County commissioners stripped him of his power as board president to appoint committee chairmen.

At the meeting where he lost his party post, Mr. Dunne stood up and moved to make Vrdolyak's election unanimous.

Mr. Dunne, who was well-read and often quoted authors in his speeches, then read these lines from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "Thou too, sail on, O ship of state ... in spite of rock and tempest roar, in spite of false lights on the shore."

In 1988, after he regained power, Mr. Dunne said he probably would seek a sixth term in 1990. But in the wake of an alleged sex-for-jobs scandal and outcries over ballooning property taxes and administrative crises at Cook County Jail, Mr. Dunne announced in November 1989 he would "hang up the boxing gloves."

Burnett said he, Natarus and another political ally, Secretary of State Jesse White, had dinner with Mr. Dunne every week, including last week.

"If you tried to pay for anything, he would get highly upset with you and say you wouldn't be able to eat with him anymore," Burnett said.

Survivors include Mr. Dunne's wife, Claudia.

Funeral arrangements were pending, but the funeral was expected to be held at Holy Name Cathedral.

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George W. Dunne

- Born: Feb. 20, 1913

- Before World War II: Precinct work for Kelly-Nash organization and worked for the Chicago Park District.

- Military service: 42 months, U.S. Army; nearly two years, Korean War.

- 1955-1962: Served in the General Assembly; majority leader in 1961.

- 1961-2004: Committeeman of the 42nd ward.

- 1962-1990: County Board member; president from 1969.

- 1976-1982, 1987-1990: County Democratic chairman. Assumed post upon the death of Richard J. Daley.

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