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Daley up to his gills in diplomatic mess

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Mayor Richard J. Daley watches as Crown Prince Akihito -- now emperor -- nets a fish at the Shedd Aquarium in 1960. (Tribune file /)

John Kass
November 28, 2007

Because of a humble gift given to him by the Daleys of Chicago almost 50 years ago, Emperor Akihito of Japan was recently forced to apologize to his nation in an embarrassing loss of face.

The gift?

A couple of lowly bluegills -- Illinois' official state fish -- from the Shedd Aquarium, given to then-Crown Prince Akihito by Mayor Richard J. Daley in 1960.



John Kass
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The tasty Chicago bluegills escaped into Japanese lakes and rivers, making more bluegills, ravaging the ecosystem, steadily destroying the native species and the fish harvests.

That's why, a few days ago, in what The New York Times called "a rare expression of contrition," Emperor Akihito was compelled to humble himself. That's unheard of in Japan, a country where honor is paramount. It's also unheard of for the mayor of Chicago to apologize for anything. If you don't believe me, just take a ride on the public transportation system.

"I brought bluegill back from the United States nearly 50 years ago and donated them to a research institute of the Fisheries Agency," the embarrassed emperor was quoted as saying in a wire report.

"Its cultivation started as there were great expectations of raising them for food in those days," said the emperor, an ichthyologist (fish expert). "My heart aches to see it

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has turned out like this."

My heart aches, too. But not for the emperor. It aches for Mayor Richard M. Daley's pinkie.

The only thing to do, it seems, is for the son of the great fish giver, our current mayor, to act honorably in recompense for this diplomatic disaster.

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His father, Chicago's fish giver -- the late Richard J. -- often fondly dreamed of Chicagoans and that noblest of creatures, the fish.

"People from the Loop could catch fish in the Chicago River and barbecue them on lower Wacker Drive," he was known to say, when he dreamed such dreams, even though to most people, eating fish from the Chicago River would be a nightmare.

But the Daley clan's fish dreams have become a catastrophe for the people of Japan. This is an international incident. An emperor has been humbled. And now Chicago's emperor must pay.

One possibility would be for Daley to drop Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics in favor of the competing Olympic bid offered by Tokyo.

But that would cause great pain among all the guys who know the guys behind the guys who expect to cash in on all the Chicago Olympics development action, including concrete pouring, concessions, trucking, asphalt, real estate and so on. Daley can't afford to upset them.

There is another option. The Mayoral Pinkie Option.

Surely you've seen it in the movies, such as "Black Rain" and "The Yakuza," where the American movie star insults the Japanese. The only way to reconcile the debt of honor is to lop off the pinkie, without a whimper.

So our noble mayor can cut his pinkie off with fine Chicago cutlery -- not the whole thing but two knuckles' worth -- wrap it in a handkerchief and mail it to the emperor.

"You're crazy. Daley won't cut his pinkie off," said one guy who knows guys behind the guys who know Daley. "If you're going to do it right, you've got to cut it off while you're looking straight ahead, and you're not supposed to scream. And you know the mayor would scream and ruin the whole thing."

Of course he'd scream. I'd scream, too. So would you. But I'm not the mayor.

Certainly, other loyal mayoral retainers -- guys who've made fortunes in city deals financed by hapless taxpayers -- would be lining up, begging for the honor to cut off their pinkies to save the mayoral pinkie.

Daley understands the problem of invasive species. The infamous zebra mussel is one. And what about the Asian carp? It flies out of the water just as fishermen stand up in their boats, hurling their 4-foot-long bodies that weigh over 100 pounds right at the most sensitive of all fishermen areas.

The mayor understands how they feel, now.

"These things are coming up the canal," Daley warned in 2004. "They're not worried about federal or state or local governments. If we don't stop them now, they will destroy the Great Lakes."

He lobbied for federal money to stop these invasive species, with electric fences and other magical tools of science, realizing the burdens imposed by these illegal piscatorial immigrants.

I wanted to talk to an expert, but it was late, so I talked to a guy who was an environmental writer once.

"That's the problem with invasive species. You think you'll find loads of zebra mussels in the Caspian Sea? No," he said. "They have predators. But here, they don't, so their populations explode. Same with the Asian carp."

Either way, voluntary or involuntary, a great fish sin has been visited upon the people of Japan and their proud emperor by the city of Chicago.

A debt must be paid.

Whose pinkie, Mayor?

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