

# Another Star in Chicago's 5<sup>th</sup> Congressional District

By Harold Meyerson

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In March of 2004, a few days before the Illinois Democratic senatorial primary, I wrote a column for this page headlined "[A Bright Hope in Illinois](#)." It was, I believe, the first column for a daily newspaper outside Illinois devoted to a rising young pol named Barack Obama. Bolstered by polling that showed Obama to be the clear leader in the race, I fearlessly predicted that he'd become Illinois' next senator and quoted the assessment of Jan Schakowsky, the Democratic member of Congress from Chicago's Gold Coast district, that Obama would "march right onto the national stage and the international stage."

Well! Thus buoyed by my undisputed status as a kingmaker in Illinois politics (undisputed, I acknowledge, because it's never been asserted), I write today about another of the state's Democrat, this one a candidate in Tuesday's special primary election for the overwhelmingly Democratic congressional district in Chicago's North Side that until recently was represented by Rahm Emanuel. As events would have it, this candidate has a lot in common with Obama. Both are Harvard Law grads. Both have authored notable books. Both worked on behalf of unemployed steelworkers: Obama as a community organizer, this candidate as a lawyer who won 2,500 of them their pensions after their employer refused to pay up. And both have politically problematic names.

Little about [Tom Geoghegan](#) resembles Ronald Reagan, but his hard-to-decipher last name rhymes with the former president's. A wry, heterodox liberal intellectual with a lifelong passion for American workers, Geoghegan first burst on to the literary and political scene with a great, slightly crazed ode to Chicago -- in the best tradition of Hecht, Algren and Bellow -- that ran in the New Republic in the 1980s and then with his 1991 book "Which Side Are You On? Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on Its Back," which was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has since written four other books, some on the shambles that is the American legal system. He's become the go-to lawyer for Chicagoans who've lost their jobs through discrimination or who've been denied the pay they've earned. And now, he's the congressional candidate who supports single-payer health care, expanding Social Security to compensate for the decimation of private pensions, and government investment to rebuild our offshored manufacturing sector.

I confess that I'm both a friend of Tom's and a Geogheganologist -- a distinction I attained when, for a year, I edited the back-page columns he was then writing for the American Prospect. A typical Geoghegan column combined the sense of outrage that all columnists need with broad historical knowledge and a particularly Chicagoan feel for life as it is actually, grubbily, lived. One column on mass transit cut from scenes of Geoghegan stuck in traffic on the way to O'Hare to Henry Clay's case for internal improvements (roads and canals) to a discussion of how much easier it is to get from Dublin to Madrid than it is to get from Chicago to Detroit. In another column he wrote before Wall Street's collapse, Geoghegan lamented the high percentage of elite college graduates who funneled themselves into finance, and he [characterized](#) the bank bailout policy of the Bush administration as "the new social contract: In Tribeca, at least, no kid will

ever lose his (or her) first (or second) condo." Another time, he [wondered](#) "why, in the party of William Jennings Bryan, is there no one demanding an interest cap on our Visa cards and our MasterCard," also noting that in Chicago, "payday lenders charge more than the Mob wants for juice loans." In the collected works of Tom Geoghegan, the value of social and economic ideas and practices is set by the way they play out on the streets.

There are, by actual count, a gazillion candidates for Emanuel's old seat on Tuesday's ballot, including a number of conventionally liberal pols, some of whom would probably make fine members of Congress. But Congress has no shortage of conventionally liberal or conventionally conservative pols. Of streetwise political intellectuals who've devoted themselves to a career of economic justice it has none.

I'm not predicting that Geoghegan will make quite the splash in world affairs that my earlier Chicago endorsee has made. I'm not even predicting that he'll win. But while the nation is going through its first real systemic economic crisis since the Depression, a guy who can knowledgeably compare public works programs clear back to the Jefferson administration and who can sniff out a bankers' relief program a mile away seems to me exactly what Congress needs.

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Tom's Website: <http://www.geogheganforcongress.com/>