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DOWNTOWN BLACKOUTS

COMED'S CEO

Rowe shows he can admit a mistake

By Jon Bigness

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

At a news conference on Thursday's blackout, John W. Rowe displayed the same tough and blunt style that admirers hailed when he was named in February 1998 as chairman and chief executive of Unicom Corp., the parent of beleaguered electric utility Commonwealth Edison.

With complete composure and without a hint of defensiveness, Rowe apologized to millions of ComEd customers and to Mayor Richard M. Daley for this summer's series of blackouts.

"This level of service under these conditions is a disgrace to us. It's a personal disgrace to me," Rowe said standing outside during a light drizzle. "I will not tolerate it, and you will not."

Known as a straightforward and affable boss with a track record for guiding firms through wholesale

change while generating profits, Rowe already had moved last week to shore up ComEd's image. He decided to reimburse customers for spoiled food and other financial losses caused by outages.

Rowe did not pretend Thursday that words of apology would be enough to restore confidence in the utility. Asked if he could assure customers such a blackout won't happen again, he said: "I can't."

Before joining Unicom, Rowe was president and chief executive of New England Electric System, based in Westborough, Mass., for nine years. He landed that job in 1989 after the head of that company was killed by lightning.

Before that, he was president and chief executive of Central Maine Power Co., probably most widely known for its now-closed Maine Yankee nuclear plant.

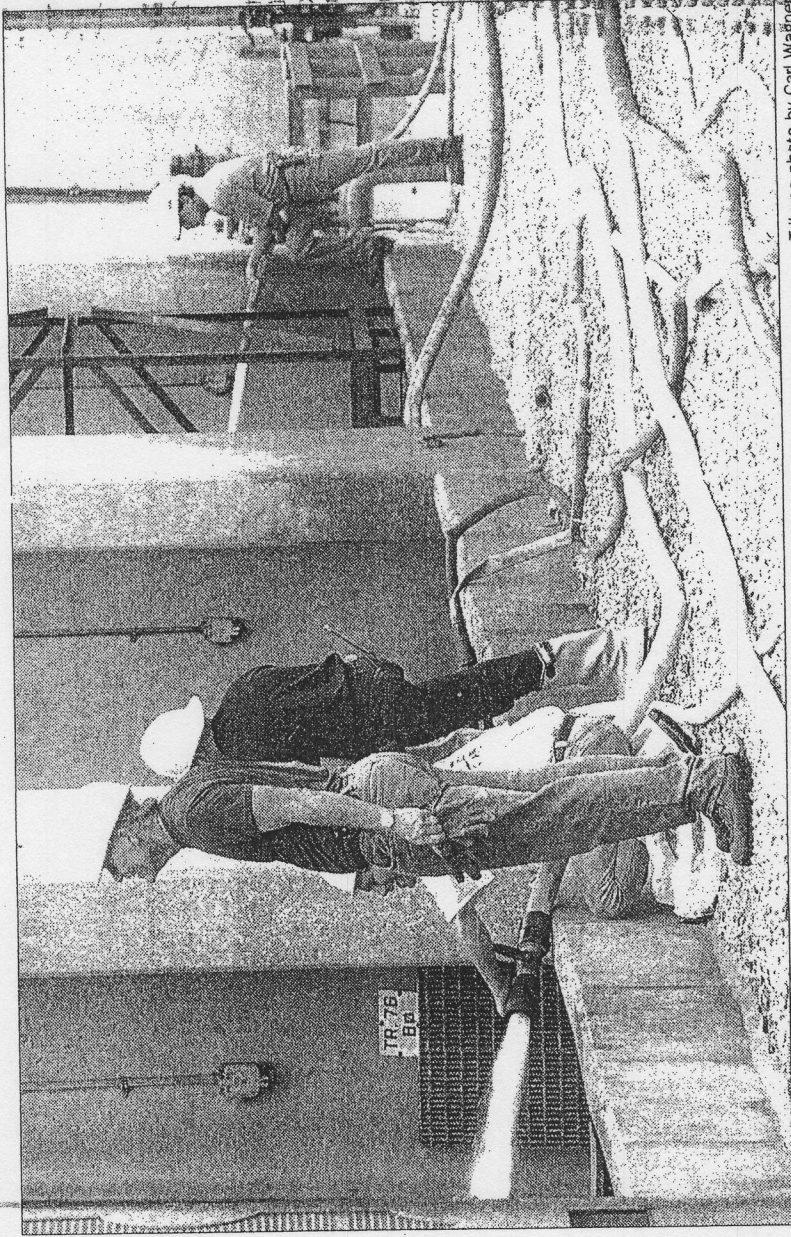
Rowe improved performance and cut costs and turned around the companies.

During the 1970s, he was a lawyer with the now-defunct firm Isham, Lincoln & Beale in Chicago, where he specialized in nuclear power issues. One of his major clients was the nation's No. 1 nuclear utility, ComEd. That experience was welcomed at Unicom, whose nuclear program is in disarray.

Rowe, a Wisconsin native and graduate of the University of Wisconsin and its law school, earned \$4.2 million in his first year at ComEd.

He has been described as tough and intimidating, yet somewhat casual and offbeat. He earned a reputation as a jokester at New England Electric. At his going-away party, employees wrapped duct tape around his mouth to prevent him from telling jokes.

In a 1998 interview, Rowe said one of the attractions of coming to Chicago was that his favorite coin shop is just around the corner from Unicom's headquarters.



Tribune photo by Carl Wagner

Workers for Commonwealth Edison use hoses to cool down overheated gear on Thursday at a substation at 9th and Jefferson Streets in Chicago where an equipment failure occurred.