



Arrest another chapter in corrupt Ill. history

By DON BABWIN – 17 hours ago

CHICAGO (AP) — Federal prosecutors' stunning allegations of corruption by Gov. Rod Blagojevich on Tuesday once again reminded the nation of Illinois' shameful history of crooked governors.

George Ryan. Dan Walker. Otto Kerner. All have served as Illinois governor since the late 1960s, and all later served time in federal prison.

"I can tell you one thing," Chicago FBI Chief Robert Grant said. "If it isn't the most corrupt state in the United States, it's certainly one hell of a competitor."

Blagojevich's arrest Tuesday "reinforces the notion that Illinois is one of the most corrupt states in the nation," said Charles Wheeler, head of the Public Affairs Reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Blagojevich, a Democrat, was elected in 2002 as a reformer promising to clean up after Ryan, a Republican who sits in a federal prison after his 2006 conviction for steering state contacts and leases to political cronies.

Ryan is now asking President George W. Bush to commute his 6 1/2-year prison sentence to the just more than a year he's already served before the president leaves the White House next month.

Well before Ryan, there was Walker. After leaving office in 1977, he committed bank fraud, perjury and misapplication of funds and went to prison.

Kerner was convicted in the 1970s of bribery, tax evasion and other charges for getting horse racing association stock at a reduced price in exchange for doling out favorable horse racing dates while he was governor in the 1960s.

Even when Illinois' stories aren't about corruption, corruption pushes its way in.

When Ryan cleared the state's Death Row, the accounts all included the allegations swirling around the governor.

When retired cops are asked about the notorious 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, they often point out that the commission that labeled the chaotic scene a "police riot" was chaired by Walker — who, they happily add, was a convicted felon.

But the charges that landed those other governors behind bars were nowhere near as sensational as the things Blagojevich is accused of doing — starting with an attempt to sell the U.S. Senate seat vacated by President-elect Barack Obama.

When Ryan was charged, nowhere did U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald talk about Abraham Lincoln rolling over in his grave, as he did Tuesday in reference to Blagojevich's alleged conduct.

"The brazenness of it blows everything else out of the water," said Wheeler of UofI-Springfield.

Still, the allegation may not be, as Fitzgerald suggested, a "truly new low" for the state. Wheeler suggested that what the governor is accused of doing — trying to make money for himself and land his wife a cushy job — harkens back to bygone days in Illinois when politicians were almost expected to help themselves while running the state.

Help themselves, they did. Ask longtime residents, who remember opening the paper in 1970 to read about the \$750,000 stuffed in shoeboxes in former Secretary of State Paul Powell's home after he died. Senior citizens may recall Orville Hodge's guilty plea in the 1950s to embezzling more than \$1.5 million in state funds while he was state auditor, and the two planes, four automobiles and homes in Illinois and Florida he bought with the money.

Tuesday's news has left Illinois residents like Chicagoan Suzy Thomas sad about the way history seems to repeat itself around here.

"Unfortunately, you know, it's kind of politics as usual in Chicago and Illinois," said Thomas, 55. "Now we're the top state for number of governors who've been indicted."

Associated Press Writer Lindsey Tanner contributed to this report.