



NYT: Portrait of disgraced Blagojevich

'I was speechless and sickened,' says a critic of disgraced Gov. Blagojevich

By Susan Saulny

The New York Times

updated 8:03 a.m. CT, Wed., Dec. 10, 2008

CHICAGO - Little in Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich's background prepared the people of Illinois for the man who was revealed in the criminal complaint that dropped like a bombshell here on Tuesday. Delusional, narcissistic, vengeful and profane, Mr. Blagojevich as portrayed by federal prosecutors shocked even his most ardent detractors.

"I almost fell over," said Cindi Canary, executive director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform and a frequent critic of the governor. "I was speechless and sickened. In all of the millions of indictments I've read over the last years, I can't remember anything as vile as this."

Mike Jacobs, a Democratic state senator and former friend of the governor, suggested that Mr. Blagojevich may have lost his grip on reality.

"I'm not sure he's playing with a full deck anymore," Mr. Jacobs said. "I think he brought a lot of this on himself. He's so gifted, but so flawed in a number of fundamental areas. It's like he dared the feds to come get him."

Drama and suspicion

Drama and suspicion have long surrounded Mr. Blagojevich, a 51-year-old Democrat known locally for his quirky love of Elvis and a big black signature hairstyle of his own. Though he ran for office as a reformer, he has been embroiled for years in a federal investigation into hiring fraud that included multiple departments under his purview.

More recently, his reputation was left badly damaged after the corruption trial of the political fund-raiser Antoin Rezko, who was convicted in June of fraud and bribery among other charges. Mr. Blagojevich's name and administration surfaced again and again during Mr. Rezko's highly publicized trial in Chicago. The governor's approval rating, according to The Chicago Tribune, had sunk to 13 percent.

Yet, despite what looked like his lead role over many years in a political theater of the absurdly corrupt, Mr. Blagojevich, the seemingly earnest son of a Serbian steelworker, was not charged with any wrongdoing. Rumors swirled, and denials were issued.

Tuesday changed all that. It was not simply the extortion and venality with which he was charged that left mouths gaping, but the ruthlessness and grandiosity revealed in the federal wiretap transcripts, even as he knew he was being investigated.

"You might have thought in that environment that pay to play would slow down," the United States attorney in Chicago, Patrick J. Fitzgerald, said at a news conference announcing the charges. "The opposite happened: it sped up. Governor Blagojevich and others were working furiously to get as much money from contractors, shaking them down, pay to play, before the end of the year."

In the words of Dick W. Simpson, head of the political science department at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and a former city alderman: "It's over the top, even for the governor."

Figuring out the pathology

Ms. Canary, the reform advocate, said she was trying to figure out the pathology that might explain such actions because they are not part of the classic style of Chicago corruption.

"He was raised in the old Chicago ward system where the most important principle is loyalty," she said. "It's about protecting one another, spreading perks, and earning personal power. It's not about huge personal enrichment."

But that, according to the 76-page criminal complaint, seems to be exactly what Mr. Blagojevich, who cast himself as a man of the people, was after.

Whatever his current motivation, he came into office with a very different persona. As a young congressman representing the North Side of Chicago, Mr. Blagojevich was pegged as a rising star with a populist touch. Undistinguished as a lawmaker but with proven likability in and out of Chicago, he seemed hellbent on pushing reform and cleaning house in a state with an embarrassingly overt culture of political corruption.

Running on a do-good theme as a candidate of change, he swept into the governor's office earlier this decade mainly on promises that he would be different, that he would restore integrity to the governor's office after the previous chief executive, George Ryan, was sentenced to six and a half years in federal prison for racketeering and fraud.

"Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, Illinois has voted for change," he told a crowd at his victory party on election night in 2002.

'Stuck' as governor

Back then, it was not a secret that Mr. Blagojevich had big dreams for himself that included the White House. The federal complaint suggested that he was disenchanted with being "stuck" as governor, and had his eyes still trained on the presidency — in 2016, since 2008 was a lost cause.

Kent Redfield, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said Mr. Blagojevich had clearly come into office believing he was destined for bigger things, and may have been tripped up by that ambition.

"The combination of arrogance and stupidity that would prompt him to continue in these types of behaviors is just stunning," Dr. Redfield said. "There's no feedback loop or reality check."

Mr. Blagojevich had grown increasingly isolated in recent years, particularly from his own state's Legislature and even from his father-in-law, Dick Mell, a powerful longtime Chicago alderman who showed him the political ropes as a younger man.

The governor was rarely seen around his offices in Chicago and Springfield, preferring instead to spend time at home on the North Side.

"I believe he became a prisoner of his own home," Mr. Jacobs said.

Dr. Redfield said he had little sympathy for a man who regarded "the state of Illinois like it's a big Chicago ward, where a U.S. Senate seat is like granting a zoning variance or liquor license."

He added: "The damage to the state, it's going to take a long time to dig out."

This article, "A Portrait of a Politician: Vengeful and Profane," was first published in The New York Times.

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