



In this Dec. 20, 2008 file photo, Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White speaks at a news conference in Chicago regarding Gov. Rod Blagojevich's choosing of former Illinois Attorney General Roland Burris to fill President-elect Barack Obama's U.S. Senate seat. White has declared he would not certify a Blagojevich appointee. But lately pressure to seat Burris has intensified and Senate Democrats seem to be softening toward the beleaguered appointee. White feels he has been unfairly blamed for holding things up. (AP Photo/Paul Beaty, File)



## Ill. sec. of state feels the heat in Burris

By MIKE ROBINSON – 8 hours ago

CHICAGO (AP) — Until recently, Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White may be best known on the national stage for establishing an inner city tumbling team.

After carving out a long career as a steady team player with little taste for controversial political fireworks, the normally calm, bland 73-year-old suddenly finds himself in the heat as a reluctant player in the furor over Barack Obama's vacant Senate seat.

"I'm not angry, I'm not upset, I just want this to be part of history," White told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

His tumbling team has appeared on the "Late Show" with David Letterman and "Tonight Show" with Jay Leno. But while the Jesse White Tumbling Team prep work for its role in Obama's inaugural parade, White himself has been caught up in the spotlight over Gov. Rod Blagojevich's appointment of former Illinois Attorney General Roland Burris to fill the U.S. Senate seat left vacant by Obama.

White and Burris have long known each other and get along. Burris was the first African American elected Illinois attorney general and White is the first black elected secretary of state. In happier times, White might have been delighted to give his official certification to Blagojevich's appointment.

But Blagojevich faces federal charges that he plotted to sell or trade the Senate seat. While there's no allegation of corruption by Burris, the appointment unleashed a firestorm. Democratic leaders insisted they would never seat an appointee of the tainted governor.

White joined in, declaring he would not certify a Blagojevich appointee. But lately pressure to seat Burris has intensified and Senate Democrats seem to be softening toward the beleaguered appointee.

White feels he has been unfairly blamed for holding things up.

"The Senate — they've used me as a fall guy, because they could have sworn without my signature," White said. He said he told that to Sen. Dick Durbin, the senior Democrat in the Senate, in a phone call Tuesday.

"That's exactly what I told him and he understood," White said.

Longtime acquaintances say there should be no surprise that White is uncomfortable. He is a steady organization man who worked his way up in Chicago politics.

"He's just been a solid citizen, and I think he's very uncomfortable being in the spotlight," said Roosevelt University political scientist Paul Green.

White spent 16 years in the Illinois House before graduating through the hierarchy to become Cook County recorder of deeds for six years. In 1998, he was elected secretary of state — a post with 3,600 jobs and millions of dollars in contracts.

His tenure has been largely free of controversy and that's how he likes it.

"He doesn't have a history of histrionics or calling press conferences at the drop of a hat," said political scientist Kent Redfield of the University of Illinois-Springfield. "He's been a dependable Chicago Democrat — forever."

Previous occupants of the office used its powers as a springboard — Democrats like Rod Blagojevich to the Senate and Republicans Jim Edgar and George Ryan to govern.



But that's not Jesse White. He says he's gone as high as he wants to.

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