

Blagojevich sits out as Obama makes history

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted Aug 21, 2008 @ 09:22 PM

Last update Aug 21, 2008 @ 10:08 PM

SPRINGFIELD — He's the leader of the nation's fifth-largest state, the home of a presidential candidate on the cusp of history.

But Gov. Rod Blagojevich is taking a back seat as his fellow Democrat, Sen. Barack Obama, prepares to claim the presidential nomination.

There's the legislative morass in which Blagojevich finds himself mired, but there's also fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko — awaiting sentencing on a federal corruption conviction — who haunts him and can only complicate matters for Obama.

The second-term governor will stand by while three other statewide officers — all potential gubernatorial rivals — get speaking assignments at the Democratic National Convention next week in Denver. And Blagojevich won't attend Obama's introduction of his vice presidential running mate Saturday in Springfield.

"He's Kryptonite," said state Rep. Jack Franks, a Woodstock Democrat who's often critical of Blagojevich but also is a convention delegate for Obama's main rival, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton. "It's better to keep him away than make him a story line."

Blagojevich spokesman Lucio Guerrero said Blagojevich had already committed to a send-off of National Guard troops in Chicago on Saturday. But the governor realizes he could muck things up.

"He doesn't want to cloud the day," he said. "It should be Obama's day, and he doesn't want to be getting in the way or creating a controversy."

It's a long way from five years ago, when, according to a witness in Rezko's trial, Blagojevich confided that he wanted to be president himself.

Rezko, a fundraiser for Blagojevich and Obama, was convicted in June on charges that he tried to squeeze companies seeking state business for kickbacks and campaign contributions after a trial that exposed crooked politics in Illinois that Blagojevich says he has no part in.

Witnesses at Rezko's trial described conversations in which Blagojevich suggested favors in exchange for contributions.

Blagojevich has not been charged with any wrongdoing, but federal court records show he has been questioned by prosecutors multiple times. Obama has also not been accused of any wrongdoing.

"People think 'Blagojevich,' part of what they think is 'Rezko,' and that's the last thing Obama wants is anything that would call attention to that issue," said political scientist Kent Redfield of the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Clinton made Rezko part of her campaign against Obama, but while his name was mentioned in Rezko's trial, it did not come up with the regularity of Blagojevich's.

The governor couldn't have endeared himself to Obama in July, when he invoked Obama's name in a testy exchange with reporters over Rezko.

Obama's campaign is not discussing decisions about convention speakers, who will include Attorney General Lisa Madigan, Comptroller Dan Hynes, and Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias — all potential challengers to Blagojevich should he seek re-election in 2010. Rezko's not the governor's only liability. Blagojevich, in many minds, carries the burden of inaction in Springfield at a time when his party controls every statewide office and both houses of the General Assembly.

The governor and lawmakers have almost constantly feuded the last two years, complicating state budget negotiations and continuing to stall a statewide construction program to repair roads, bridges and schools.

"I don't think he's worked very hard to get along with other Democrats," said Mike Lawrence, director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

"His poll numbers are bad. If you're somebody out there running for office, you don't necessarily want to be identified with the guy."

