

Corruption brings down a governor

As Illinois state senators decided his political fate, Blagojevich played the national media

By Amanda Paulson | January 30, 2009 edition

CHICAGO

The Illinois Senate brought to a close two months of drama surrounding the future of Gov. Rod Blagojevich on Thursday when they removed him from office, unanimously convicting him in their impeachment trial and ceding the office to Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn, who was sworn in about an hour later.

The vote came at the end of a dramatic day in the state Senate, in which Governor Blagojevich – who had refused to take part in the trial or send a lawyer to represent him — showed up to give an impassioned 45-minute closing statement in which he declared his innocence, insisted that the impeachment proceedings were unfair, and pleaded with lawmakers to acquit him.

So far a crime has not been proven here in this impeachment proceeding,” he declared. “How can you throw a governor out of office with insufficient and incomplete evidence?” The senators remained unmoved.

“He’s inept, he’s corrupt, he’s cost the state millions of dollars,” said Sen. Kirk Dillard (R) during the deliberations, echoing the remarks of many of his colleagues. “After that performance today, I wish him luck on his new Hollywood career.”

Blagojevich was impeached on 13 counts, eight of which had to do with the criminal charges brought against him in December, which alleged that he had tried to sell the US Senate seat vacated by President Obama, had demanded the firing of Chicago Tribune editorial writers in exchange for state help with the sale of Wrigley Field, and had engaged in pay-to-play corruption schemes.

Prosecutors had it on tape

The senators largely relied on the 76-page criminal complaint and the numerous excerpts of wiretapped phone calls that it detailed, since the US attorney’s office had asked them not to call witnesses involved in the criminal trial. The office did release four FBI tapes in which Blagojevich appeared to be trying to shake down a racetrack operator for a campaign contribution in return for signing legislation.

In his remarks Thursday, Blagojevich refused to respond to the criminal charges, since they have yet to be proved in court, and instead focused on the other charges listed in the articles, mostly

stemming from allegations that he abused his office by ignoring laws and lawmakers in his policy decisions.

Blagojevich portrayed those actions — including efforts to expand health care and get prescription drugs from Canada — as actions that antagonized legislators but were designed to help citizens. “The means were legal and the ends were moral,” he said.

Many Senators, meanwhile, were angered by the governor’s refusal to participate in the trial, and his misrepresentation of the rules on a three-day national media blitz that he embarked on instead. They noted that, contrary to his claims, he could have called witnesses and introduced or challenged evidence, and they said that they would have preferred he take part in the trial rather than come for a last-minute appearance in which he wasn’t under oath and didn’t take questions.

“As always, the governor plays only by the rules that he chooses,” said House prosecutor David Ellis in his rebuttal. “Under the governor’s rules, you don’t ask him questions.”

Mr. Ellis reminded senators that they didn’t need to believe all 13 counts constituted impeachable offenses in order to convict him.

Blagojevich “doesn’t have a Constitutional right to be governor,” Ellis explained. “Being governor is not a right but a privilege, and the governor has forfeited that privilege. ... A pattern of abuse is unmistakable.” Legal and political experts generally agree.

“What impeachment is saying is that in the minds of a substantial number of the general assembly who were elected by the people, you have sufficiently abused your power that you cannot govern in this state,” says Dawn Clark Netsch, a professor at Northwestern University’s law school and a former candidate for governor in 1994. “You don’t have to prove it in the same way you would if it were a specific court of law.”

Blagojevich warned that his removal would set a “chilling precedent,” but political scientists say that, in fact, this is the sort of case constitutional framers may have had in mind when they gave the power of impeachment to the legislature.

“They had to put the ultimate power somewhere,” says Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois in Springfield. “What keeps the legislature from abusing that power is that it requires a two-thirds majority [to convict] and that everyone has to run for reelection.” President Clinton, he notes, was acquitted in his impeachment trial because he still had significant public and legislative support, whereas Blagojevich long ago lost both.

Blagojevich alienated many

Blagojevich's ouster marked the end of a political career notable for a fairly rapid rise and then a long decline that began soon after he was first elected governor in 2002. It's unlikely he would have been impeached without his arrest on Dec. 9, but he had alienated most of the legislature long before that, and some lawmakers had been talking about impeachment for many months.

"He never built coalitions, he never built support," says Professor Redfield. "The criminal complaint allowed the people who hate him to pull the trigger." His approval rating was 13 percent even before he was arrested.

The former governor was born — as he reminded senators in his speech Thursday — to immigrant working-class parents, but got powerful political backing early on through his father-in-law, an influential Chicago alderman.

His charm and speaking ability helped along the way, as did the fact that Illinois voters were ready for a fresh face and a change of party after the previous governor, George Ryan, was engulfed in ethics scandals. (He was later convicted and sent to prison on corruption charges.)

"It was a lot of luck and a fluke of circumstance," says Christopher Mooney, a political scientist at the University of Illinois in Springfield. "But he never understood what government was all about. ... It was a story of self-aggrandizement as much as greed."

In addition to removing Blagojevich from his office, the senators voted to bar him from ever holding political office in Illinois again. But if his political career is over, Blagojevich seems determined to continue to fight in the court of public opinion — perhaps hoping to sway the minds of some jurors in his upcoming criminal trial.

This week he appeared on numerous national media outlets, including The View, Good Morning America, Larry King Live, and the Rachel Maddow Show.

"It sounded like a crazy thing to do, but by and large he survived it without giving away the store," says Professor Mooney. "He's got this internal logic to his arguments, and if you don't know the background, it sounds like he's being railroaded. ... Fortunately for the state of Illinois, the Senate and the House understand the context that this is in."