

Posted Online: Dec. 08, 2009, 6:17 pm

One year later: 'Blagojevich hangover' continues

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By Benjamin Yount

SPRINGFIELD — Believe it or not it was one year ago today that FBI agents knocked on Rod Blagojevich's front door and opened the final chapter in the former governor's troubled tenure in office.

Blagojevich was indicted, impeached and removed from office by the end of January. He has pleaded not guilty to the almost two dozen federal charges against him and is preparing for a trial next summer.

But Blagojevich's presence was felt throughout state government after his removal from office and will continue to be a factor at the statehouse.

Political science professor Kent Redfield said it could be a decade or more before the state is cured of its "Blagojevich hangover."

The University of Illinois at Springfield professor says voters will have to find new faith in new leaders. He said Blagojevich did so much damage that voters may have a hard time trusting any elected official.

Redfield said the "lightning rod" may be gone, but all of the problems with state government are not.

Illinois still is suffering through a massive budget deficit, there is gridlock and distrust at the state capitol, and "a year later it doesn't seem like we've really turned much around."

David Yespen with the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University agrees.



Photo: AP

Former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, center, leaves his home through a back alley Dec. 10, 2008, a day after he was arrested on federal corruption charges. One year after the former governor's arrest, a hangover effect still lingers over the state, political observers say.

He said Illinois had a chance for "massive and monumental" change, but changed very little.

Yespen said lawmakers did move to rid the state of Blagojevich but didn't do enough to rid the state of the problems he never solved.

Redfield said the former governor surrounded himself with an entire crew of people who played fast and loose with state finances and did some real damage to the state of Illinois.

Redfield said Blagojevich's legacy is and will be a legacy of corruption, incompetence and disappointment.

Yespen said Blagojevich's legacy could hurt the state when the economy turns around. He added that companies don't like uncertainty, and nothing is more uncertain than Illinois' political landscape at this point.

Yespen said that kind of damage will also linger. He said of Blagojevich's legacy, "reputations like that are hard to shake."

But both men said there is some good from the long nightmare that was the end of the Blagojevich administration.

Illinois lawmakers spent much of this past spring trying to legislate against the next corrupt governor.

Redfield said the General Assembly did a good job of making it harder for a corrupt leader to get so much from the state.

He pointed to new transparency laws, new freedom of information regulations and sweeping changes in some of the ways the state spends money as good examples.

Yespen is happy to see a new-found citizen's initiative. It grew from the post-Blagojevich recall provision signed into law by Governor Pat Quinn.

Yespen said he is less thrilled about the campaign finance proposal. He wished for more with that plan.

Redfield added you cannot prevent someone who already is corrupt from committing a crime. But, he said, the new laws created in the wake of Blagojevich's troubles will make it tougher on someone trying to do the same type of things federal prosecutors accuse the former governor of doing.