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'Kooky aunt' of Ill. politics attempts comeback

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When Republican Judy Baar Topinka ran for governor in 2006, she warned that incumbent Democrat Rod Blagojevich was a ticking ethics time bomb who was bankrupting the state.

Less than four years later, Blagojevich is awaiting trial on federal corruption charges, and the state is billions of dollars in debt.

Still, Topinka refuses to come right out and say I told you so.

"The coulda, woulda, shouldas," she said recently, sipping through a straw from an ever-present cup of coffee. "Upward and onward. No need to look back, let's go forward."

Forward for Topinka is an effort to return to statewide office. At 65, she's running for Illinois comptroller, saying she can't stand to see state government engulfed by financial problems.

"What's going on with the state is just so disturbing to me that ultimately the only way I could fight back is to run," Topinka said.

DuPage County State's Attorney Joe Birkett, who ran for lieutenant governor alongside Topinka in 2006, has a different theory.

"Maybe Judy's running to just re-establish her good name in Illinois politics," Birkett said. "She deserves to get her good name back. What Rod Blagojevich did to her was uncalled for."

What Blagojevich did was spend millions of dollars to make Topinka look dishonest and nutty.

He portrayed her as a crony of corrupt former Gov. George Ryan. He referred to her as "Ryan's treasurer" even though she didn't work for him and was elected separately. He ran video of her dancing a polka with Ryan to suggest the two were close political allies.



Blagojevich's ads portrayed Topinka as goofy or heartless, each one ending with the line "What's she thinking?" He even questioned her support of military veterans despite Topinka's long record of backing the military and her son serving in the Army.

Blagojevich's wife, Patti, said earlier this year that her husband privately called Topinka a "kooky old aunt."

Of course, Topinka sometimes contributed to that image with her purple-red hair, thrift-store clothes and tendency to make odd comments. She said her opponents in the Republican gubernatorial primary were "morons." She jokingly threatened to beat up Blagojevich with a rolling pin.

Topinka heads into the Feb. 2 primary against two little-known Republican candidates, suburban Chicago village trustee Jim Dodge and cable TV host William Kelly, former head of National Taxpayers United of Illinois.

Dodge and Kelly criticize Topinka's long history in state government and her relatively liberal views on social issues, such as abortion and gay rights.

Dodge griped that her recent endorsement by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees shows she represents "business as usual" politics. And Kelly has labeled Topinka "the ultimate RINO" -- or Republican in name only.

Still, political observers predict that the three-term state treasurer will benefit from widespread buyer's remorse over Blagojevich.

"She has the best trump card in the deck," said Andy Shaw, executive director of the Better Government Association. "The reminder that if people had not listened to (Blagojevich's) advertising ... she would still be our governor and Illinois would not be a national laughingstock."

Blagojevich's bad-mouthing may have damaged Topinka's image, but she still has two weapons in her arsenal: strong name recognition and a scandal-free reputation, said Kent Redfield, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Topinka entered politics in 1981, winning election to the Illinois House after years as a reporter in the Chicago suburbs. After four years in the House and 10 in the Senate, Topinka ran for state treasurer. She won, becoming the first woman to hold the post, and was re-elected twice.

Since losing the governor's race, she's spent the past three years serving on the board of the Regional Transportation Authority and staying active in party politics.

Shaw, of the BGA, said Topinka is still one of the state's most popular Republicans. He and others say the off-the-cuff remarks and flamboyant antics that Blagojevich used against her -- dancing a polka with Ryan, for instance -- are also part of why voters like her.

"I've polka'd with more people in this state than I can count. Ethnically, I polka," said Topinka, the grandchild of Czech and Slovak immigrants.

She proposes merging the offices of treasurer and comptroller, a move that she says would save up to \$20 million in payroll and other costs. The merger would require a constitutional amendment. And she'd like to see the cemetery regulation function of the comptroller's office moved to the Department of Professional Regulation.

"She's just a real person, and I think that comes through," said former Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar, who was instrumental in launching Topinka's campaign for governor. "She's a natural in politics, she connects ... very well with the ordinary folks."

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