

Democratic governor arrested in Illinois corruption probe

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The arrest of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich Tuesday could portend a major political crisis for both the state and national Democratic Party. The governor, first elected in 2002, is charged with multiple counts of corruption and solicitation of bribes, including offering to sell the US Senate seat from Illinois left vacant by President-elect Barack Obama.

Blagojevich and his chief of staff, John Harris, were arraigned before a federal judge the same day and then released on bail. Harris is charged with acting as the go-between in multiple bribery and extortion schemes in which Blagojevich sought to trade access to state contracts and other benefits in return for campaign contributions.

Outlined in a 76-page affidavit filed by the FBI, the case against Blagojevich gives a glimpse of the gangsterism and money-grubbing that characterize official politics in the United States, involving both big business parties. Democratic and Republican officeholders routinely trade government favors for cash, whether in the form of campaign contributions or outright bribes.

Based on the wiretap transcripts excerpted in the criminal complaint, the governor of Illinois is a particularly crude, foul-mouthed and stupid practitioner of capitalist politics, but he is not an aberration. Conversations similar in substance, if not style, to those made public in the Blagojevich probe will be taking place today in government offices and political headquarters in every state and throughout Washington DC.

According to the transcript, Blagojevich reveled in his absolute right to appoint a successor to Obama who would hold the Senate seat until the next election in 2010—including selecting himself if he so pleased. He declared, "I've got this thing and it's (expletive) golden, and, uh, uh, I'm just not giving it up for (expletive) nothing. I'm not gonna do it. And I can always use it. I can parachute me there."

In another conversation, discussing the replacement then favored by Obama, his close adviser Valerie Jarrett, Blagojevich exploded against a suggestion that he give this "mother_____ his senator. F____ him. For nothing? F____ him." He then added that he would pick a rival candidate "before I just give f_____ Jarrett a f_____ Senate seat and I don't get anything." Shortly after this conversation between Blagojevich

and Harris, Jarrett withdrew from consideration for the Senate seat and took a position as a White House counselor.

Six major charges were outlined in the FBI affidavit. Two arise from the testimony in a corruption trial earlier this year in which Chicago slumlord and political fixer Antoin (Tony) Rezko was convicted of influence peddling. The same witnesses whose testimony led to the conviction of Rezko identified Blagojevich as the instigator of efforts over a five-year period to shake down construction companies seeking state road contracts and to extort campaign contributions from officials of a state-supervised teachers' pension fund.

Four additional charges are based on evidence obtained through court-ordered wiretaps that began on October 21. These include further construction-linked shakedowns related to a \$1.8 billion Illinois Tollway expansion, extortion of executives at a pediatric hospital seeking a state permit, a threat to withhold state financial assistance to the Tribune Co. if those responsible for hostile editorials in the *Chicago Tribune* were not fired, and the auction of Obama's Senate seat.

By far the most media attention has been given to the allegations relating to the Senate seat. Blagojevich and Harris surveyed the field of a half dozen hopefuls to replace Obama, estimating what they could extract in return for an appointment, with the governor always reserving the right to appoint himself to the post if not offered enough.

The governor's calculations were invariably of a mercenary character. He complained repeatedly about his family's financial circumstances, declaring in one monitored phone discussion about the Senate appointment, "I want to make money." In a November 5 conversation with a deputy governor, he mulled over possible appointments in an Obama administration, and his aide helpfully suggested that the post of secretary of energy is "the one that makes the most money."

US Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald rejected any suggestion that Obama is directly implicated in the influence peddling practiced by the Illinois governor, telling a press conference Tuesday, "there is no allegation in the complaint that the president-elect was aware of it and that is all I can say."

The media has been at pains to suggest a political distance between Obama and Blagojevich in the past. Their closest connection is through Obama campaign strategist David

Axelrod, who managed Blagojevich's 2002 campaign. Obama supported a rival to Blagojevich for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 2002, and Blagojevich returned the favor in 2004 when Obama sought and won the Democratic nomination for US Senate.

However, Obama made his political career on the basis of the closest ties with the corrupt Democratic machines in Chicago and Illinois. Rezko was an early supporter. In the course of the presidential election campaign, Obama denied any illicit connections to the convicted political fixer, and the national media generally accepted his declarations uncritically. Obama's relations with Rezko were never made a major issue in either the Democratic primary campaign or the general election.

There has also been nearly complete media silence on the relationship between the governor and Obama's newly appointed White House chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, who succeeded Blagojevich as the congressman for the Fifth Congressional District of Illinois, which covers much of northwest Chicago. Emanuel won a contested primary for the Democratic nomination in 2002 after Blagojevich gave up the seat for his successful run for governor.

The scandal is clearly only in its early stages, however. The affidavit itself bears the signs of having been written in haste, and the decision to use that procedure rather than present an indictment to a grand jury suggests that Fitzgerald made a last-minute decision to have Blagojevich arrested, perhaps to forestall the governor appointing himself as a successor to Obama. He now must hold a preliminary hearing or formally indict Blagojevich within 20 days.

Fitzgerald himself admitted the rushed character of the procedure, citing as a reason the governor's greatly accelerated fundraising efforts. Blagojevich set a target of raising \$2.5 million in campaign contributions before January 1, when a new state law banning such contributions by state contractors would take effect.

Other prominent Democrats could find themselves engulfed in the affair. On Wednesday, Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., son of the civil rights figure, was identified as the individual described in the FBI affidavit as "Candidate Number 5," the Senate hopeful who purportedly offered Blagojevich, through an intermediary, up to \$1 million in campaign contributions in return for the appointment. Jackson, who had a 90-minute meeting with Blagojevich the day before the governor's arrest, held a press conference to deny any involvement in a "pay-to-play" scheme.

The governor's relationship with Tribune Co. boss Sam Zell also raises many questions. The billionaire took over Tribune Co. last year using the media conglomerate's pension funds as security for the debt-financed transaction, and then filed for bankruptcy Monday, one day before the governor's arrest.

The editorial board of the *Chicago Tribune* was politically hostile to Blagojevich, regularly attacking him as corrupt and calling in October for a state constitutional amendment

permitting recall of public officials like the governor. The newspaper had also editorialized in favor of his impeachment.

As part of his financial manipulations, Zell sought state involvement in the sell-off of Wrigley Field, one of the properties owned by Tribune Co., which also owns the Chicago Cubs baseball team. According to the FBI affidavit, Blagojevich was furious that the media billionaire was seeking a financial bailout from his administration while the newspaper Zell owned was attacking him.

The governor declared, according to the affidavit, "what Rod Blagojevich is doing to help the Tribune owner is the same type of action that the Tribune is saying should be the basis for Rod Blagojevich's impeachment... Rod Blagojevich stated that he is going to go to the Tribune owner and tell the Tribune owner that Rod Blagojevich will not help the Tribune owner because the Tribune owner's own paper will argue to impeach Rod Blagojevich for his actions in helping the Tribune owner."

By all indications, these conversations were held, and Zell did not report the attempted extortion to anyone—nor did he tell the *Tribune* to change its editorial line. The newspaper did learn of the FBI wiretap on Blagojevich and agreed to keep it secret for eight weeks, so that Fitzgerald could gather more evidence against the governor. Fitzgerald publicly thanked the newspaper for its cooperation.

Also linked to the scandal is the president of the Service Employees International Union, Andrew Stern, who apparently spoke to Blagojevich or an aide about the possibility of establishing a tax-exempt foundation that would give the governor a six-figure salary after he left office, or even providing a post for him at Change to Win, the labor federation established by the SEIU and several other unions after they broke with the AFL-CIO.

Blagojevich himself faces increased pressure to resign immediately or face impeachment by the state legislature. Nearly every prominent Democrat, including Obama, has called on him to step down. If he were to resign, he would be succeeded by Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn, a Democrat who has publicly clashed with Blagojevich. According to one press report, Quinn said he had last spoken with the governor in the summer of 2007.



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