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Money at root of Blagojevich's rise and fall

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Money got Rod Blagojevich elected, and in the end it ruined his political career.

The affable showman with the Elvis Presley hair and John Wayne swagger reveled in his rags-to-riches story: the son of working-class immigrants rising to become Illinois governor. He cast himself as a champion of the underdog motivated solely by a desire to help those who struggled to get by.

But Blagojevich's own actions and charges leveled by federal prosecutors suggest a competing narrative - a drive to accumulate money and power.

Now, six years after he first was elected governor and two months after his arrest on federal corruption charges, Blagojevich, 52, is banished from Illinois politics forever, has lost his \$177,000-a-year job and his future is uncertain.

Claiming he's innocent and searching for a job, Blagojevich is continuing the publicity blitz that began during his impeachment trial. Next up: an appearance Tuesday night on the "Late Show with David Letterman."

The fact that he needs money is indisputable - and ironic.

He was arrested Dec. 9 for alleged crimes that include conspiring to sell President Barack Obama's vacant Senate seat and threatening to withhold funds from a children's hospital if he didn't get a campaign donation.

Already in debt because of mounting legal fees, prosecutors say he was trying to amass as much money as possible before a new ethics law kicked in Jan. 1. Now he now faces the prospect of an expensive criminal trial that could send him to prison, and his wife recently was fired from a \$100,000-a-year job.

Blagojevich insists that he is innocent, and that anything he tried to do was for the people of Illinois.

Still, in transcripts of conversations secretly recorded by the FBI, the governor is painted as constantly angling for a higher-paying job or more campaign cash. In one exchange with advisers discussing the Senate seat, Blagojevich talks about his family's security, stating simply:

"I want to make money."

There were red flags even before Blagojevich was elected governor.

Despite short and undistinguished stints in the Illinois House and U.S. Congress, "he was raising incredible amounts of money, breathtaking amounts," for his gubernatorial race, said Dawn Clark Netsch, a Northwestern University law professor who ran for governor in 1994. "I don't think we made the connections then, but it was an extraordinary thing."

To get elected in 2002, Blagojevich raised about \$23.6 million, more than the \$22 million spent - combined - by both gubernatorial candidates four years earlier, according to figures from the Sunshine Project at the University of Illinois at Springfield. In his re-election campaign two years ago, he raised \$28.9 million, according to the project. Both were records for a gubernatorial candidate.

While Blagojevich relentlessly pressed fundraisers to make sure money was rolling in, he tirelessly traveled the state to tell his story.

It was amazing, he told voters, that someone like him, was running for the state's highest office.

His father, Rade, a Yugoslav immigrant who was held as a Nazi prisoner during World War II, worked at a Chicago steel mill; their mother, Millie, the child of immigrants from Bosnia-Herzegovina, was a ticket-taker at the Chicago Transit Authority. Blagojevich said he shined shoes, delivered pizzas in college and washed dishes on the Alaska pipeline before earning a law degree at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif.

Blagojevich insisted he raised so much campaign money so he could take on the established powers in Springfield.

"A lot of us said in response, 'It makes you look awfully dependent on your donors,'" said David Morrison, deputy director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

That connection was taken a step further halfway through Blagojevich's first term, when his father-in-law and political mentor, Chicago Alderman Richard Mell, made a sensational claim: that a Blagojevich adviser was arranging appointments to state boards and commissions in exchange for \$50,000 contributions to the governor's campaign fund.

Blagojevich said the accusation was sour grapes over a dispute the two were having over a landfill and Mell later retracted his accusation, but federal investigations were on.

Before the scandals, Blagojevich had a strong start as the state's first Democratic governor in 25 years.

He convinced a majority-Democratic General Assembly to approve a tricky \$10 billion bond sale to help balance the budget. He won legislative approval for universal health care for children, signed legislation banning discrimination against gays and lesbians and won several minimum-wage hikes.

But he galled Democratic and Republican lawmakers alike with his grandstanding, implementing an illegal program to help senior citizens buy prescription drugs from Canada and expanding health care for adults even though the Legislature said no.

Blagojevich was so frustrated that he couldn't get lawmakers to approve his ideas and that the media wouldn't cover them, he turned to what he knew best - fundraising - in hopes of buying television ads, according to a former adviser who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing federal investigation.

"I think a lot of the meltdown at the end was because he was frustrated with his job; he wasn't getting things done," the former adviser said.

Meanwhile, federal investigators were hauling in his inner circle, and testimony at their trials exposed shakedowns for state business.

Testimony during the corruption trial of fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko - convicted last June of squeezing Blagojevich campaign contributions from companies seeking state business - was the most damaging for Blagojevich.

Ali Ata, former head of the Illinois Finance Authority, claimed that Blagojevich twice discussed a state job with him after Ata had made two \$25,000 contributions to the governor's campaign.

Joseph Cari, former Democratic National Committee finance chairman, testified that Blagojevich dreamed aloud about running for president and, during an October 2003 fundraising trip to New York, said big-money state contracts would be available to those willing to help.

Stuart Levine, a former member of the Health Facilities Planning Board, who pleaded guilty in the kickback scheme, said Blagojevich told him to "stick with us and you will do very well for yourself."

But even after Rezko's conviction, despite knowing his administration still was under investigation, prosecutors say Blagojevich attempted to leverage political favors in return for campaign money.

Federal officials say they overheard Blagojevich on wiretaps scheming to sell Obama's Senate seat in exchange for money or a job and talking with a lobbyist about how to get campaign contributions in exchange for signing legislation that would mean millions of dollars for the horse-racing industry.

In one of the tapes, played during Blagojevich's impeachment trial, the governor's brother, Rob, tells him that a lobbyist had assured him the owner of a horse track was "good for it" - presumably a campaign donation - and must "decide which accounts to get it out of."

Blagojevich interrupts his brother twice: "Right - before the end of the year though, right?" Then again: "OK, so ... but clearly before the end of the year, right?"

Chris Mooney, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said if the allegations are true, Blagojevich was simply corrupted by power.

"The governor's office is like an orchard with tons of low-hanging fruit," Mooney said. "The governor has lots of power to give out contracts, employment, sign bills and vetoes.

"Blagojevich suddenly was thrust into this position where he had ton of goodies almost at his complete discretion to hand out, (but) he didn't ... realize you have these powers to do public service, to make government work the way it's supposed to work, not to line your own pocketbook."

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