It's hard to avoid contemplating how Secretary of State Jesse White has screwed up lately on so many fronts.

White has managed to mostly avoid scandals throughout his life and as a result has become one of the most popular Democratic politicians of the past half-century – one year winning all 102 Illinois counties, and then still taking about 70 percent of the vote during the the national Republican landslide of 2010. (Democratic Attorney General Lisa Madigan won with 65 percent, and Governor Pat Quinn won with less than 47 percent that same year.)

But White's engineering of the appointment of Derrick Smith to his old House seat was no doubt the biggest mistake the secretary has ever made in his decades-long political career.

As you know by now, Smith (D-Chicago) was arrested earlier this month on a federal bribery charge. Smith is White's guy. There is no plausible deniability for White, and nothing at all disputing the fact that White hired Smith at the secretary of state's office even after the *Chicago Sun-Times*
discovered that Smith was involved with some shenanigans at his city job, from which he'd been fired. He then put Smith into the House seat even though Smith was the sort of person who could barely speak in floor debates.

Smith was pretty much an embarrassment even before he was busted. He was in over his head and was obviously lacking in skills. He was White's hack, and everybody knew it. But at least Smith looked like a clean embarrassment back then. Now he's White's horribly dangerous embarrassment with a federal arrest record.

Before the last election, White had promised that this would be his final term. But he changed his mind last year and said he would run again in 2014. It's possible that the Smith arrest could cause him to rethink those plans. The high-profile bust has most certainly put some blood in the political waters. But whether he runs again or not, this is the first time White has ever displayed any sort of political vulnerability at all. He's been completely unbeatable, but now there are visible cracks in his bright, shining armor. The political superman looks a little more human.

He's done something that he's never done before: White has handed his potential opposition a beautiful gift. "He's an honest, stand-up kind of a guy," White said after he engineered Smith's appointment to the House last year. That'll look great in a TV ad ... for his opponent.

White also defied legislative protocol this year by going after state Senator Annazette Collins (D-Chicago). Collins was backed to the hilt by Senate President John Cullerton as she fought what turned out to be a losing battle with Patricia Van Pelt-Watkins. Cullerton has dumped more than $167,000 into the primary, an almost unheard-of amount for a race such as this. That sort of involvement is usually a big warning sign to other pols to stay the heck away. Legislative leaders don't like it at all when fellow party members challenge their authority over their own caucuses.

This isn't the first time that White has meddled in that Senate district, though. He backed candidates against former Senator Rickey Hendon more than once. And even though White seemingly picked a blue-chip candidate to challenge Collins (unlike the Derrick Smith debacle), and even though Collins is an appointee and hasn't yet made much of an impact in the chamber, the Senate Black Caucus was very aggressive in making extra sure that Cullerton expended serious resources to defend her. As a result, this particular challenge has seemed to generate harder feelings than White's past involvement.

But this was the first time that any party leader has directly and so bluntly challenged Senate President Cullerton's authority over his own caucus. In this business, if somebody disrespects you, then they'd better be made to fear you, or that disrespect could very well spread to others. White is currently attempting to fight off a 9-percent budget cut proposed by Quinn (who, like everyone but White, backed Senator Collins). White has offered to cut 2 percent instead. Good luck with that.

Secretary White needs to clean up his messes. And fast.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax *(a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com .*