

Illinois Governor Takes an Unfair Hit – but Deserved It

Written by Rich Miller
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Last Tuesday was a public-relations nightmare for Governor Rod Blagojevich, but he did manage to avert a complete PR meltdown with a last-minute deal. A few months after freezing wages of nonunion state workers and deducting 4 percent from their checks to pay for their pension contributions, a month after vetoing pay raises for legislators and judges, two weeks after he unilaterally slashed the operations budgets of two statewide constitutional officers, and the same day that Latino legislators slammed him for breaking his promise about not cutting funds for social programs, the Chicago Tribune reported that the governor had given pay raises to some of his employees.

The *Tribune* story was mostly “gotcha” journalism. Only six of Blago’s 91 employees received pay raises. The largest boost, \$10,000, went to an attorney, who is now making a relatively modest annual salary of \$65,000. Three workers received \$5,000 raises, and one received a \$1,000 bump.

The governor has cut his own office budget by 15 percent, even including those pay hikes. The six workers were “probationary” employees, hired at lower salaries than the position had previously paid, and the raises did not exceed those former wages. And, according to the gov’s office, seven out of 16 probationary employees were not retained at the end of the fiscal year.

In other words, there’s really no story here.

But when you live by “gotcha” politics, as Governor Blagojevich has since Day One, you die by “gotcha” politics.

Blago lured the General Assembly into formulating a gaming-expansion bill, then publicly berated legislators for doing just that. He never uttered a single objection to budget increases for statewide constitutional officers, then ordered them to slice their budgets just one day before the new fiscal year began. He traded his support for some Latino-backed programs in exchange for Hispanic votes for his revenue increases, then cut those programs from the budget without any prior warning.

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So, the *Trib* story might have been unfair if viewed in a vacuum. But the governor certainly deserves every milligram of grief that nonstory has wrought. If he wants to act holier than thou, then he'll be held to a much higher standard.

And all of his self-congratulation about cutting his office budget obscures the fact that Illinois ranked fourth in the nation this year in budget increases, according to a report by the National Governor's Association.

The governor did manage to avoid a complete PR disaster last week, however. Advocates for the homeless were planning to set up a soup kitchen in front of the Thompson Center last Wednesday to protest the governor's \$1-million reduction of homeless-prevention funds.

If the pay-raise story was ever connected to the homeless-budget-cut story, the governor would look like just another "Old Way" politician, helping out his buddies at the expense of the helpless while simultaneously pleading fiscal poverty.

The governor's office begged the homeless activists to call off the demonstration. "We're on the same side," the gov's people reportedly implored. Nothing doing, said the advocates. When you cut half the funding for a homeless program, you're not on our side.

So, the governor did what any desperate politician would do – he caved like a marshmallow sunroof. By the end of the day, the million-dollar cut was restored, and, for good measure, the governor promised he'd try to find \$3 million more.

The short-term problem was solved, but the governor now has a serious long-term problem on his hands.

Latino legislators are furious that the gov double-crossed them with his reduction vetoes. The Latino Caucus is remarkably solid, and there's enough of them that they could probably torpedo any of Blago's bills next year at will.

Senator Miguel del Valle (D-Chicago), who was incensed at the governor's vetoes, was asked whether he could ever trust the governor's word. "As it stands now," he said, "I will have my doubts, and I will have to look for ways of getting rock-solid guarantees, and that would include written guarantees, before I cast a vote in support of a budget."

After about a year in office, nobody trusted Dan Walker, a self-centered serial prevaricator with dreams of national office who thought he was smarter than everyone else and who relentlessly promoted himself as an independent by deliberately picking demagogic fights with other politicians. Sound vaguely familiar?

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at (<http://www.capitolfax.com>).