Blagojevich mess will linger for years in Illinois
By Christopher Wills and Dob Babwin
July 1, 2011

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) — In the end, Rod Blagojevich did not bring doom for his party or the national political figures whose names got dragged into his scandal. But long after he is behind bars, Illinois will still be cleaning up the mess left behind by the state's cartoonish former governor.

Blagojevich — who drew laughs around the nation for his goofy haircut, foot-in-mouth quotes and affinity for Elvis Presley — will also be remembered here for six years of dysfunctional leadership. He contributed to a massive budget deficit, nearly paralyzed the government with his stubborn inaction and damaged the reputations of some fellow Democrats in President Barack Obama's home state.

A day after Blagojevich was convicted on wide-ranging corruption charges, experts and veterans of Illinois politics said his attempt to sell Obama's Senate seat was only the most heinous example of the harm inflicted by a lazy, disinterested chief executive.

"Clearly he was one of the worst governors that we've seen in modern times," said Chris Mooney, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "Not only in terms of ethical shenanigans ... but he really was incompetent. He didn't understand what he was doing."

Testimony at Blagojevich's two trials depicted a governor who all but left the state to run itself. Lawmakers quickly concluded they couldn't trust him to spend money fairly and refused to work with him — a political breakdown that carried lasting consequences.

If Blagojevich was in his office — which was rare — he seemed unwilling to do his job. Aides said he was known to hide in the bathroom to avoid discussing complex issues.

They talked about tracking the governor down at his tailor or even a bowling alley to force him to sign legislation. He showed up late for meetings and public events and explained that he had been busy jogging or playing video games with his children.

The lack of cooperation that developed with lawmakers delayed many proposals, including major public works projects that would have created jobs.

"His approach tarnished everything he touched," agreed Debbie Halvorson, a former Democratic state legislator and member of Congress.

Blagojevich didn't create the state's budget problems, which began under Republican Gov. George Ryan and were caused by national economic trends. But there's ample evidence that Blagojevich made the crisis worse at a time when decisive action might have helped.
He didn't cut spending when tax revenue plummeted. Instead, he got lawmakers to go along with temporary fixes like skipping the state's annual pension payment. Those maneuvers got the state through one budget season but left an even bigger hole to fill the next year.

Blagojevich's core political promise was that he wouldn't raise income taxes or sales taxes, and he kept that pledge even when the state's deficit grew to billions of dollars. But that didn't keep him from spending more money, sometimes without legislative approval, on things like expanded health care for children and free prescription drugs for the elderly.

Mooney said Blagojevich also hired unqualified candidates to run programs and drove competent people out of government. His handed jobs to campaign donors and circumvented laws that give preference to veterans so he could hire political allies.

State employees flocked to unions under Blagojevich's tenure, partly to gain protection from his salary cuts and political hiring decisions.

But Alan Gitelson, a Loyola University political scientist, cautioned against blaming all of Illinois' problems on Blagojevich.

"There's a limited amount of damage any governor can do because he is dealing with the Legislature," Gitelson said. "These are joint efforts."

Blagojevich's troubles did not extend in any lasting way to his party.

The state still has a Democratic governor, Pat Quinn, who was elected despite twice serving as Blagojevich's lieutenant governor. And Obama's name surfaced repeatedly in Blagojevich's two trials, but there was never any suggestion that he did anything wrong as Blagojevich schemed to benefit from his power to choose Obama's Senate replacement.

Last fall, when Rahm Emanuel left his post as White House chief of staff, some political analysts warned that his dealings with Blagojevich could doom his chances to be elected mayor of Chicago.

But Emanuel easily won. And while he testified briefly at Blagojevich's second trial, he was never accused of any wrongdoing. In fact, on the charge directly involving Emanuel — that Blagojevich tried to shake down Emanuel for a fundraiser — jurors were unable to reach a verdict.

The politician hurt most by his association with Blagojevich was Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., whose name arose in a scheme by the governor to solicit campaign contributions in exchange for naming Jackson to the Senate.

By the time jurors convicted Blagojevich, Jackson had been badly damaged.

Gitelson said Jackson had been "a bright light" for the party who might have been a contender for Chicago mayor or U.S. senator.
Now it's unlikely that Jackson "is in any sense a viable candidate outside his congressional district," Gitelson said.

Blagojevich gave the public reason to question the judgment of Democratic leaders who supported the governor long after evidence of misconduct had surfaced.

House Speaker Michael Madigan, also chairman of the state Democratic Party, eventually refused to attend meetings with the governor because he felt it was a waste of time. That did not stop Madigan from serving as co-chairman of Blagojevich's re-election campaign, however.

Quinn vouched for Blagojevich's honesty. Obama endorsed Blagojevich for re-election.

"We've got a governor in Rod Blagojevich who has delivered consistently on behalf of the people of Illinois," Obama said in 2006.

Republicans seemed to pay a higher price after one of their own, Gov. George Ryan, left office amid scandal in 2003 and eventually went to prison. The GOP lost every statewide race in the next election, and four years later their candidate for governor lost in large part because the Blagojevich campaign portrayed her as Ryan's best friend.

Still, Ryan will also be remembered for his stance on the death penalty. He is an international hero among death penalty opponents for pardoning wrongly convicted death row inmates and eventually halting executions and commuting 167 death sentences to life in prison.

Blagojevich has no such legacy. His biggest initiatives, such as providing health care and preschool for all children, were hobbled by the state's record-setting deficit. They're footnotes in an administration that will always be associated with scandal.

Stephen Schnorf, budget director under two Republican governors who preceded Blagojevich, said the disgraced former governor never seemed to have any ambition to lead.

"It was as if not working was the purpose of the whole thing, as if that was the goal," he said.