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Governor Sunshine

By Carol Felsenthal



Governor Rod Blagojevich rarely loses his temper, but he is hopping mad this afternoon in his sprawling suite of offices atop the James R. Thompson Center in the Loop. A reporter has just told him that his childhood buddy Danny Angarola described the adolescent Blagojevich on the basketball court as “Mr. Outside,” something of a “pretty boy,” who avoided catching elbows under the boards.

“That’s a bunch of baloney,” the state’s chief executive snarls. “I used to penetrate. Are you kidding me? Who said that? I used to drive to the basket.” He cannot let it go. Secretary of state Jesse White can call the governor’s cuts of budget “degrading” and “ugly” and “a violation of all laws of human decency,” and Blagojevich seems unfazed. The people are happy with the job he is doing, so who cares? But toss him an innocent observation on a game he gave up nearly 30 years ago that’s another story. “Didn’t like to take the ball and go inside and get the rebound!” He shakes his head in disgust. “That really irritates me.”

Blagojevich’s irrepressibly sunny disposition soon returns, however. He is looking good on this casual Friday in a navy blue polo shirt and tan gabardine slacks, their creases razor sharp. His hair, as always, looks perfect perfectly ridiculous to those who think he should lose the choirboy bangs. His runner’s body is toned, his waist trim, his stomach taut. He is as pleased as can be with the private shower in his office. He shows off photographs of himself with the actor Sylvester Stallone taken on a recent trip to Los Angeles; he was there promoting an incentive package to bring moviemakers to Illinois, but he also managed to raise money for future campaigns. He loves to tell stories, especially when he is the star, and with a reporter in the office he has a willing audience.

Life could not be better. He loves politics, and he has won every election he has entered first for the state legislature in 1992, where he stayed until 1997; then when he moved up to the U.S. Congress. Last year, he confounded the pundits by becoming the first Democrat since 1972 to win the governorship. He does seem a natural, with his high-energy style and his gift for connecting with voters, remembering not only their names but also the details of their lives. He denies it, but friends say he intends to run for President in 2008, and they point to his Hollywood jaunt as a way to build his nest egg. Once, riding in a limousine with Bill Clinton, Blagojevich had asked, “What made you think you could win in ‘92 against Bush and all those big names?” The President said he knew that if he “got the politics right,” his opponents would fall by the wayside. Today, Blagojevich acknowledges that Clinton was his model in the gubernatorial race.

The idea that Rod Blagojevich could seriously imagine himself running for President makes plenty of people in Illinois roll their eyes. Even U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky, his Democratic colleague in Springfield and Washington, laments that she cannot persuade her constituents in the tonier precincts of Evanston to take the governor seriously. His chief burden, of course, is Chicago alderman Richard Mell, the clever, scheming, clout-heavy ward boss who is happy to take credit mostly deserved for Blagojevich’s political success. In 1990, two years before Mell drafted him to run for a state House seat, Blagojevich married the alderman’s daughter Patti. Now he cannot escape the charge that Mell is secretly calling the shots a charge that Blagojevich’s colleagues stiffly deny, despite Mell’s biweekly meetings with the governor’s chief of staff and he cannot quite shed the moniker Governor Son-in-Law.

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To his critics, the marriage anchors the notion that Blagojevich is shamelessly opportunistic, willing to make other politician seven fellow Democrats look bad to buff his own profile, and comfortable pandering to win a point. Republican state senator Steve Rauschenberger, from Elgin, says that Blagojevich cannot help grandstanding because he does not know why he wants to be governor "except he wants to do something after he's governor."

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"Yes," he answered. "So long as the people like you, and you have enough campaign funds, it doesn't make any difference what the politicians think of you."

But even Rauschenberger marvels at Blagojevich's unwavering optimism, his apparent belief that no matter how infuriating his behavior or treacherous his policies, everyone even those who have been harshly critical will find him irresistible. Rauschenberger recalls when the newly elected governor came to the state senate chamber and spoke to each member individually. "I got out of my chair so I didn't have to talk to him," Rauschenberger says. "He followed me around, cornered me by the phone booth where I had retreated." Blagojevich told him that the Speaker of the U.S. House, Dennis Hastert, an Illinois Republican with whom Blagojevich had served in Washington, thought a lot of him.

Rauschenberger is among Blagojevich's harshest critics, but he may have highlighted a psychological truth about the governor: He is Clintonesque in his ability to put criticism behind him and move forward, confident in his ability to win people over. Schakowsky says she knew that he would win the governor's race when she watched him campaign at a gathering of union members. As he entered the room, she recalls, "there was this crackle of electricity. Everyone wanted to touch him."

A son of the Northwest Side with an unimpressive academic record and an undistinguished career as a small-time lawyer, Blagojevich has modest credentials, and his talents as a leader are unclear. But another childhood friend, Mike Ascaridis, says that the key to Blagojevich's ascendancy lies with his late mother, Millie, a ticket taker for the Chicago Transit Authority. She drilled her sons on one of those sentimental aphorisms usually put away with childhood toys: "Don't be afraid to dream big. You can do anything in this country." At 46, Rod Blagojevich still believes it.

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Some of Blagojevich's most fervent fans like to say that he has outgrown Dick Mell, that Mell is just a ward politician, while his son-in-law is now governor of one of the country's largest states. But as with Blagojevich's every unlikely step up the political ladder, Mell provided a boost last fall. As the alderman himself is eager to say, he was "extremely important" in putting his son-in-law in the governor's chair. (The characterization is apparently well considered: Mell rates himself as "the deciding factor" in Blagojevich's election to the Illinois House and "very, very important" in his election to Congress.)

"I think credibility was what I was able to give him at the beginning of the governor's race by helping him with his fundraising," Mell says. The first million that Mell shook out allowed his son-in-law to wage his campaign both in the Chicago area and downstate. Support downstate, where Blagojevich's TV ads ran early, proved the key to his primary victory over Paul Vallas, the dethroned chief executive officer of the Chicago Public Schools. (Blagojevich enjoyed a stroke of luck in the general election because his opponent, Jim Ryan, shared a last name with the scandal-plagued outgoing governor, George Ryan.)

Mell also showed his stuff when he organized the press conference in which Blagojevich vowed to stay in the race no matter who decided to run, including the mayor's brother William Daley, who was considering a campaign. Mell had already lined up the support of his fellow ward committeemen, but that crucial press gathering featured some heavy hitters—including Congressman Bill Lipinski and Alderman Ed Burke—and let the Daleys know that the First Brother would have a fight on his hands. Ultimately Bill Daley decided to stay out.

Still, Blagojevich's personality and strengths factored into this race in a way they had not in others. He perfected a routine that allowed him to neutralize the Son-in-Law tag by belaboring his shortcomings—for example, volunteering at seemingly every stop that he had gotten a D in algebra. David Wilhelm, the Democratic wheel who chaired Blagojevich's campaign, calls this self-deprecation "such a gift, so unlike other politicians. Could you imagine Richard Nixon making fun of himself that way?"

Danny Angarola points out that the modesty has another tactical advantage: People stop asking "the real tough questions. It lulls them into a sense of underestimating him."

Blagojevich coupled the low-key personal approach with what Jeff Schoenberg, a colleague in the Illinois House, calls “a lobe in his brain dedicated to remembering personal details about you. Vallas may have been able to explain the school aid formula to you, but Rod remembered where he met you and had people coming away feeling good.”

In 1992, when Blagojevich was first running for state representative, Mell presented him with a gift that kept on giving through the gubernatorial campaign—a driver, one of Mell’s precinct captains, Sammy Esteban, an employee of the Chicago water department. Esteban insists that he worked as a volunteer, doing the campaign driving only after he got off work; if he was needed during the day, Esteban says, he took vacation time. (Doing political work on water department time would have violated the law.)

Over the years and through the campaigns, Esteban became a kind of confidant to Blagojevich and was one of the few people who saw him when his confidence waned. According to his driver, before his speech announcing that he was running for governor, Blagojevich said, “I want you to come next to me because I’m shy.”

As the campaign wore on, the old confidence re-emerged. After a morning run through the streets of his Ravenswood Manor neighborhood, Blagojevich would bound into the front seat of Esteban’s car and stow his hairbrush—his aides nicknamed it “the football”—in the glove compartment, removing it frequently to tame his floppy mane. (Blagojevich’s top aides warned him that his bangs made him look goofy, but he insisted on keeping them.) The candidate would pop Elvis CDs into the car’s player. Between campaign stops Blagojevich and his driver were always on the lookout for the best hot dogs and Italian beef. (Blagojevich is capable of downing two dogs and a beef in one meal.) In line at Al’s #1 Italian Beef on Taylor Street, he couldn’t stop campaigning.

“Once people meet him,” says Esteban, “they take to him right away, because he’s a regular guy, a working-class guy.”

And yet Blagojevich would also show Esteban swatches of fabric for suits, and Esteban would drive him to the Oxford factory. There he had his suits made by Rocko, who has also dressed Senator Jay Rockefeller, Fifth District congressman Rahm Emanuel, and, most famously, President-elect George W. Bush.

During the race for governor, that neat demeanor was ruffled just once, a moment that also represents the low point in the relationship between Blagojevich and Mell. The candidate had offended Michael Madigan, the powerful leader of the Democrats statewide and Speaker of the Illinois House, by criticizing one of his pork barrel projects. Madigan retaliated by pointedly mentioning to reporters that Blagojevich carried unnamed “indiscretions” in his past. The press corps erupted in a post-Monica Lewinsky frenzy, unsuccessfully trying to get to the bottom of Madigan’s elusive charge. (Madigan did not return phone calls for this article.)

The episode was particularly painful to Patti Blagojevich—“It was just totally unwarranted,” she says—and thus to Mell, her father. One morning the alderman was in his car, listening as Don Wade and Roma on WLS-AM pondered what that “indiscretion” might be. Mell telephoned the station, quickly got on the air, and called the charge “baloney,” adding, “It’s even out there that Rod had consorted with a prostitute and that I had the [police] report destroyed.”

Blagojevich blew his stack and berated Mell in an angry call, according to a Blagojevich aide who witnessed it. “You put an elephant in the tent—there was no elephant and you brought an elephant in the tent by bringing it up,” he said. Typically, though, the anger soon passed. “Rod can be mad for a second, but can’t be mad for a minute,” says Mell. “I don’t think that Rod has ever held a grudge in his life.”

Steve Rauschenberger says that the purpose of Madigan's remark was perfectly clear—"a warning shot across the bow" to Blagojevich not to imagine that "Clan Mell" can outmaneuver "Clan Madigan." Rauschenberger argues that Madigan has huge ambitions for his daughter, Lisa, whom he helped elect Illinois attorney general last fall.

David Wilhelm insists that Blagojevich was befuddled by the charge, but was grateful at least that the uproar came after his mother's death. In 1997, returning to Washington with Blagojevich on Air Force One, President Clinton told him that he could call anyone in the world from the plane's phone. After failing to reach Patti, Blagojevich called his mother. "Hi, Mom. I'm on Air Force One with Bill Clinton," he said proudly.

"Oh, son," she told him, "don't you let him get you in trouble."

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Millie Govedarica grew up at Ashland and Fullerton avenues, one of eight surviving children of immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and although she was determined to be as American as anyone, she met her future husband, Rade, at a Serbian function. He was born in 1911 in a small village outside Belgrade, a child of pig farmers. He and a brother, Milorad, were artillery officers in the Yugoslav army and were on leave in their village when the Nazis invaded in 1941. They surrendered after the Nazis threatened to exterminate the entire village if all the soldiers didn't turn themselves in. Rade and Milorad—for whom the governor is named—spent four years in prisoner of war camps in Germany. After the war, the Serbian Orthodox church in Libertyville brought the brothers to Chicago. Neither spoke English or had any money.

Rade and Millie—she was 11 years younger—married in 1950. Their sons, Rod, born in 1956, and his brother, Rob, older by 16 months, attended Henry D. Lloyd Elementary School, off Armitage and Cicero avenues, near their five-room apartment at 1925 North LaCrosse Avenue in the Cragin neighborhood.

Rade was improbably optimistic and cheerful. "I don't remember him ever being in a bad mood," says his younger son. "Rosy, rosy outlook. A lot of it had to do with being in the U.S." But Rade had arrived here with a lifelong hatred of Communism and the men—among them, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt—who he thought had imposed this evil system on his beloved native country. A staunch Republican, Rade adored General Eisenhower, whose army had liberated Rade's POW camp, and Richard Nixon, who made his name outing those he labeled Communists.

Millie, on the other hand, considered herself a Democrat and liked FDR. Today, Rob, an executive with the Fifth Third Bank in Nashville, Tennessee, remains a rock-ribbed Republican.

Rod's early political leanings are a bit hazy, although the state's top elected Democrat admits voting for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984 and thinks he voted for the elder George Bush in 1988. He says he is certain he voted for Clinton in 1992 and 1996 and for Al Gore in 2000.

Millie borrowed money from her credit union to buy her boys a set of World Book encyclopedias. Rod, then nine, loved the books, especially the life stories of U.S. Presidents. He hero-worshipped Theodore Roosevelt and John Kennedy, and admired Richard Nixon for emerging victorious from his hardscrabble boyhood.

To save money, Millie and Rade never lived in anything but the most modest rental apartments. For Rade, who spoke broken English, no job was too demeaning. For a time, he was an exterminator, coming home each evening smelling like the chemicals he used to kill cockroaches. "He dealt with everything the same way," says Rod. "He just saw it as an opportunity." He made one attempt to go into business for himself, opening a laundry at Ashland and Grace. He washed, folded, and packaged the clothes, but he failed to anticipate the advent of self-service coin machines and went bankrupt. One August night he took his sons to his latest place of business, the steelmaker A. Finkl & Sons, so they could feel the heat of the furnaces. "This is how hard I work," he said to them in Serbian, the language the family spoke at home. "This is how hot it is here. You guys can choose to work like this. It's honorable work. You can make a good living. Or you can choose to be good in school and be a gentleman."

Millie, who spent 20 years as a CTA ticket taker, was practical, level-headed, funny, and sweet, and she gave her boys her own love of all things American, including, in Rod's case especially, Elvis Presley, John Wayne, Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant, and Jimmy Stewart. "That my brother and I are reasonably normal people is because of our mother," says the governor. She took a break from the CTA while the boys were young and worked in a factory across the street from their apartment so she could go home to make them lunch. And she kept them out of trouble after school by setting them up in the lobby of the factory with a shoeshine stand.

Rade insisted that his sons attend Serbian school to learn his country's history and culture and to absorb, in Rod's words, Rade's "love of freedom and hatred of Communism." Growing up in a tough blue-collar neighborhood surrounded by factories, the brothers dreaded standing at a bus stop carrying their tambouricas, Serbian instruments that resemble mandolins. "I'm going to get my ass kicked if somebody in the neighborhood sees me with this," Blagojevich recalls thinking. The younger son became what he calls a "mini attraction," singing in churches until in eighth grade his voice began to change and he could no longer hit the high notes.

The brothers shared a bedroom, but differed in skills and temperament. Rob was the more gifted athlete. "His sport was anything he wanted," recalls Mike Ascaridis. "Rob's talents created a determination in Rod to try harder." Rob was also more focused and mature, less inclined than his kid brother to childlike enthusiasms for baseball greats such as Ron Santo and Billy Williams. Rob was all chiseled features and disciplined meticulousness, while Rod was chubby cheeked and baby faced and full of impossible dreams. He looked like his mother, but he had his father's sunny personality. "I never saw him in a depressed mood or upset," Danny Angarola says.

When Rod was 13, he switched his sports focus from baseball to basketball because he could perfect his skills on his own. He practiced for hours at a time, even in the dead of winter. He wanted to be the next "Pistol Pete" Maravich, a fellow Serb known for his shooting and flashy play in college and the National Basketball Association. The theatrics of basketball were important to Rod. "He wanted to look great on the court," recalls Angarola. "He practiced his form in the mirror, especially those outside shots."

The concern for his appearance went beyond jump shots, Angarola says. Blagojevich had a distinct sense of fashion. As a boy, he "would look in the mirror and make sure his hat was on correctly." Mike Ascaridis recalls Blagojevich dragging him outside the neighborhood to shop for clothes. He and Ascaridis had their hair cut by a stylist, not a barber.

Although Rade and Millie had one goal for their sons—that they go to college—Rod was a mediocre student. “I used to go to the library a lot,” Blagojevich recalls. “I was reading books I shouldn’t have been reading. I should have been reading my homework.” Angarola was stunned to discover the 15-year-old Rod’s stash of three-by-five index cards, carefully arranged in cigar boxes. On each card he recorded a quote that he wanted to remember and use. “I think he didn’t want to ever forget a lesson that he learned.”

Watching Bears football on television that same year, Rod was transported by a half-time film of the game’s best running backs moving to the words of Rudyard Kipling’s inspirational poem “If.” Rod had never heard of Kipling. “The very next day, the first thing I did when I got to school, I went to the library, found it, and I memorized it. I discovered Rudyard Kipling through the NFL.” (He can still recite the long poem from memory.)

He followed his brother to Lane Tech, not because of the school’s high academic standards but because Lane fielded a better basketball team than the neighborhood school, Foreman. But Rod did not make the team and, after his sophomore year, transferred to Foreman, where he figured he stood a better chance of shining on the court. He broke his wrist during practice in his junior year, and decided to give up basketball and, he says, “devote myself to my studies and my future.”

He undertook one last endeavor in competitive sports after reading how a sickly, asthmatic Teddy Roosevelt remade his body through boxing. As a high school senior, Blagojevich trained in a park district program and fought two Golden Gloves matches. He won the first, although he and his opponent ended up in the infirmary, Blagojevich with bruises and black eyes. He lost the next.

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The Blagojevich neighborhood was gritty and mostly white ethnic, with the beginnings of a Latino population. Gangs would later make an incursion into Blackhawk Park, where Blagojevich and his friends played basketball, but mostly they were blissfully unaware. Mike Ascaridis recalls that when they would go to shoot hoops at Lloyd School, “you’d come up to the park dribbling and you could smell the marijuana smoke. Hippies just hanging around smoking pot and drinking beer—that never appealed to us at all.” (Blagojevich would later appear silly when he claimed not to remember if he inhaled when he twice tried marijuana in college.)

“We were straight, serious-minded guys, sports driven,” recalls his older brother, Rob. “There were temptations, but we never succumbed.”

By the time Blagojevich finished high school in June 1975, Rade had gone to Fairbanks to work on the Alaska Pipeline, chasing high wages to send his sons to school. That summer and the next, Rod went to Alaska, too, and mostly washed pots and pans ten hours a day, seven days a week, for a janitorial outfit that serviced Bechtel Corporation, the engineering company. At one point, he had the night shift job cleaning Bechtel’s trailer office. The air inside was dusty, so Blagojevich opened two doors, then left to do his chores elsewhere, knowing he would be back later. Not long afterward, a man ran up and asked if he had seen the security guard. “I said, ‘No, why?’” Blagojevich recalls. “‘Because some fucking idiot left the doors open at the Bechtel offices and there are two bears in there.’ I walked in and the two bears are just wreaking havoc in the office. The security guard is throwing pebbles to get them to go out the other door, and [he] says to me, ‘You didn’t leave these doors open, did you?’ I said, ‘No, not me.’”

The University of Tampa was an odd college choice for a kid "from the neighborhood," as Blagojevich puts it, but his brother had gone there two years before to play baseball. With a lackluster grade point average and an 18 or 19 on his ACT, Blagojevich admits, "schools like Northwestern, I couldn't get into." After two years, Rod got into Northwestern as a transfer student and majored in history. He lived at home and drove back and forth to Evanston in a 1971 Dodge Dart, which he also used to deliver pizzas.

He took a year off after graduation—1979 to 1980—to make money for law school, getting a job through a friend at the office of the Cook County recorder of deeds, and a second job, through his father, as a Serbo-Croatian interpreter for the Cook County courts. His experience does not exactly inspire confidence in the administration of justice. Once, Blagojevich was asked to interpret for a Bulgarian man who had been charged with criminal sexual assault. "That was a travesty of justice," Blagojevich recalls. "I didn't understand half of what he was saying." The authorities claimed the man had carried a gun. Blagojevich, thinking he was using the Bulgarian word for "gun," instead used the word for "cannon," so the Bulgarian defendant vigorously denied it. The man's lawyer did not object.

On another occasion, Blagojevich was called to interpret for a Croatian being represented by the law firm of then alderman Edward Vrdolyak. Impressed by the young man, Vrdolyak's investigator set up a meeting with the alderman for Blagojevich, who happened to mention the plan to one of his former Northwestern professors. "Do you really want to do that?" the professor asked. "You're about to go to law school. So do you really want to get involved in that dirty Chicago political world?" Blagojevich skipped the meeting.

In a sense, Northwestern had done its work, exposing the young man from "the mean streets," as he called them, to a world of privilege and elitism. In his spare time Blagojevich read—he remembers particularly Edith Hamilton's books about ancient Greece and Rome—and he took acting lessons, not to overcome any lingering shyness, he insists, but for reasons of "character building."

He had not done well on the LSATs and was rejected by the University of Chicago and Northwestern, but rather than go to a local second-tier law school, he enrolled at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. Alonzo Monk, a classmate at Pepperdine and currently Blagojevich's chief of staff, says the choice was influenced in part by Blagojevich's fascination with Richard Nixon, whose roots were in the area. (The summer before, on their first trip to New York City, Blagojevich and Mike Ascaridis awoke early to get an autograph from Nixon as he left his Upper East Side townhouse for his morning walk. To this day, Blagojevich entertains anyone, anytime by re-enacting the encounter, doing a quite passable imitation of the former President.)

Charles Nelson, the interim dean at Pepperdine's School of Law and at the time one of Blagojevich's professors, calls him a "good student without being outstanding." Still, Nelson—who got to know Blagojevich well during a semester abroad in London—was struck by Blagojevich's intellectual curiosity and his appetite for books whose content would never appear on any of his exams.

His love of books did not extend to other cultural endeavors. He enjoys recounting that President Nixon asked the young men what they had seen in New York and seemed pleased that they had gone to a Yankees game. When a woman who lived nearby suggested that they go to the Met (the Metropolitan Museum of Art), Rod replied, "We're going Friday to see the Mets play the Reds." While in London, he saw one play but remembers nothing more about it. He does recall every detail of going to Piccadilly Circus to see a 3 a.m. Tommy Hearnese/Sugar Ray Leonard fight, live from Las Vegas.

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Blagojevich's résumé failed to draw promising responses from Chicago law firms, but an acquaintance of his father's had a little steel company on the South Side and lived in Ed Vrdolyak's Tenth Ward. A job offer as a clerk in Vrdolyak's law practice eventually followed, and this time there was no professor to deter him. (Whether it was part of the deal or not, Rade ended up doing campaign work for Vrdolyak.) Having yet to take the bar exam, Blagojevich did a lot of photocopying. When he failed the exam, he quit his job and developed a seven-days-a-week routine—up early in his parents' apartment, drive to the University of Chicago's Harper Library (he liked its ambiance), and study until nine at night. He passed in February 1984.

None of the offers that Blagojevich had hoped for panned out, so he ended up in another clerk's job, this time for the Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund. He found work with a couple of small firms and began renting a room in the LaSalle Street offices of Sheldon Sorosky, a criminal lawyer, and his partner, James Kaplan, who handled workmen's compensation cases.

In early 1986, through Danny Angarola's brother, who was first assistant to then state's attorney Richard M. Daley, Blagojevich got hired to try traffic cases in the old traffic court building on North LaSalle Street. It was not glamorous work. Curt James, Blagojevich's trial partner, says many beginning attorneys are "dumped" in traffic court, where they are on their feet all day, sharing a desk and an office. James, who still works for the state's attorney, says he was impressed by Blagojevich's energy and his "ease with talking to everyone—judges, public defenders, victims, and defendants." John Budin, Blagojevich's supervisor, says the future governor was "so outgoing, that if he were a woman, I'd call him vivacious."

One assumes that Blagojevich never really wanted to be a prosecutor and used the job as a résumé filler until he could move on. But not everyone was critical of that quality. "You knew he was going places," says John Lagattuta, another traffic court prosecutor. "He was a mover and shaker; never stood still." One Friday after work, Blagojevich confided to John Budin his ambition to be President of the United States.

Blagojevich continued his private practice on the side—house closings, probate work, small-bore matters that assistant state's attorneys are allowed to handle as long as they avoid conflicts of interest.

Blagojevich was eventually transferred to the courts at 51st and Wentworth, near the Robert Taylor Homes, where he handled some hard and depressing criminal cases. After barely two years as a prosecutor—the position, he now admits, was a steppingstone—Blagojevich resigned to take a job as an associate with Sorosky and Kaplan, handling workmen's compensation cases, a low-prestige, nuts-and-bolts practice. Five months later, he went out on his own. "Rod wanted to be more creative," says Sorosky.

In February 1988, Blagojevich's father suffered a massive stroke. Rade would live another ten months, but he was severely damaged and never went home again. His father's horrific condition shocked Blagojevich into thinking about the future, and the 31-year-old bachelor had politics on his mind in March that year when he attended a fundraiser for Alderman Richard Mell. Walking into Zum Deutschen Eck, a German restaurant on Southport Avenue, Blagojevich spotted the alderman's pretty 23-year-old daughter, barely a year out of the University of Illinois with a degree in economics. Having broken up with her boyfriend, she had been moping around the Mell house and working at the spring company that her father had started in his garage (it had made him a millionaire several times over). "If you go out with me, I'm going to show you the time of your life," Blagojevich promised her.

Alderman Mell soon took note of his daughter's personable, energetic boyfriend—Mell's

own son, now on the city payroll at O'Hare International Airport, was shy and obviously not suited to politics—and gave him a part-time staffer's job handling legal and nonlegal matters for residents of the 33rd Ward. Blagojevich had to hang around on Monday nights—"ward night"—and on Saturdays. "From a business standpoint, it was helpful because it gave me a chance to meet more people," Blagojevich says. "I didn't have any big anchor corporate clients. I had to get a new person to hire me or I couldn't pay the bills. Your uncle gets hit by a car, call me." (*Chicago Tribune* reporters investigating Mell later discovered that his son-in-law's salary showed up on the books of four divisions of city government. Blagojevich says that his father-in-law was paying him "out of position," something that, he claims, "aldermen would do all the time.")

Blagojevich kept another office on West Montrose Avenue. He hired his mother to keep things tidy and to greet potential clients. It wasn't exactly "L.A. Law," Blagojevich says. Once, he was trying to sign up a new client when his mother stormed into the office. "She throws this telephone message at me: 'Gladys Shiba just called, and she's disgusted with the way you're handling her case.' Storms out of there. And this potential client is looking at all of this."

* * *

Rod and Patti were at home on a Sunday night in 1992 when Mell called in a panic to ask his son-in-law if he would run for a seat in the state legislature. Mell had to know immediately because the race had been turned upside down by an unexpected defection. He warned Blagojevich that he would probably lose—he would be running against an incumbent backed by Mayor Daley, Congressman Dan Rostenkowski, and former park district chief Ed Kelly. With Mell mobilizing the precinct captains, however, Blagojevich surprised everyone by winning.

In the process, he proved that he was born to campaign. "He would visit every bingo game in the district," recalls Sammy Esteban. "He'd play a game and donate \$25 or \$100, make a speech, and pass out literature." When he spoke to people, Esteban adds, the warmth seemed to "come from inside him. Not phony."

Like most freshman legislators, Blagojevich started out by "lying low and watching," says Tom Cross, a Republican who became a close friend in Springfield. In the meantime, Blagojevich made friends with members of both parties. Jan Schakowsky, then a colleague in the Illinois House, saw him as upbeat and optimistic. "For Rod, every day is a pretty good day," she says. "He didn't agonize over 'What if I say this?' or 'What if I make somebody mad?'"

Critics say that he did not need to agonize, because Mell called him on the House floor and told him how to vote. Friends of Blagojevich's insist that is not the way it played out. "I've never once heard Alderman Mell indicate to [Blagojevich] how he should vote or what he should believe," says Jay Hoffman, a House colleague. Indeed, no one would ever mistake Mell for a policy wonk. "Mell is interested in the game and winning the game, but he doesn't care for or against any particular policy," says Mike Ascaridis, who became a Mell precinct captain.

Blagojevich served on the criminal judiciary committee, where he helped draft a truth in sentencing bill and introduce a bill to take guns from people with domestic battery convictions. Both eventually became law. Senator Carol Ronen, who also served on the committee when she was in the House, says that although Blagojevich's Northwest Side district was hardly a bastion of progressiveness, Blagojevich was a "total progressive" on issues such as abortion and gay rights.

Others were less impressed. One colleague noticed his tendency to talk about “good government,” but not “to struggle with issues.” Republican Steve Rauschenberger, who arrived in the General Assembly the same year as Blagojevich and was later named chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, says that while Blagojevich was “exceptionally personable,” Rauschenberger would never have taken him a complex issue.

Sammy Esteban recognized that Blagojevich was not fully engaged. “Did I get elected to get license plates for somebody?” he complained to Esteban.

Blagojevich’s chance to move up came after Republican Michael Flanagan beat embattled Ways and Means chairman Dan Rostenkowski in 1994 for the Fifth District congressional seat. Two years later, the conservative Flanagan was an easy target for a Democrat. With Mell running the show and Mayor Daley’s support to boot, Blagojevich easily won the primary against Nancy Kaszak, and he coasted to victory in the general election.

In his three terms in Congress, Blagojevich was probably best known for his work on gun control legislation, most of which the Republican Congress blocked. He also focused on issues of transportation, influenced by Congressman William Lipinski, a close confidant of Mell’s. According to Blagojevich’s first chief of staff, John Wyma, Blagojevich and Mell would talk every couple of weeks, often about matters other than politics. In all, Blagojevich had trouble shaking an image as “Congressman Lite.”

And being one of 435 did not suit his growing need for the limelight. As a back-bencher in the minority party, “you have very little impact on what goes on,” he complained to his law school classmate Lon Monk, who went to work for Blagojevich in Congress. His second chief of staff, Dave Stricklin, says Blagojevich was annoyed by the slow pace of Congress.

John Wyma points out that Blagojevich did not wear his congressional lapel pin—a move symbolic, Wyma says, of the representative’s view of Congress as “a group of folks who spent lots of time reinforcing a Washington perspective on things. He didn’t get elected to Congress to wear a pin and go to caucus meetings.”

* * *

Blagojevich’s mother died of lung cancer in January 1999—Sammy Esteban took her to many of her chemotherapy appointments—and later that year he was ready for a change. He also missed his family. Patti and he had had their first daughter, Amy, in 1996, and Patti rarely went to Washington. Blagojevich bought a two-bedroom condo on Dupont Circle, but he stayed there by himself. He used to tell Esteban, “Amy isn’t going to recognize me.” Had Blagojevich stayed in Washington, Patti says, “I don’t feel like we would have had a second child.” (Anne was born earlier this year.)

As it became clear that scandal had fatally wounded Governor George Ryan, Blagojevich redoubled his already energetic efforts to raise money. (He seems to enjoy the never-ending task that most politicians claim to loathe.) “I’d miss a lot of those [Democratic] caucuses,” he said. “I had other things to do, like go running, [or do some] fundraising.” Asked to give an example of Blagojevich’s goal-oriented approach to his congressional work, Dave Stricklin answers, “Having X amount of dollars raised by X date.”

Then an opportunity to acquire the visibility that still eluded Blagojevich emerged in the despised person of Slobodan Milosevic, the fiercely nationalistic Serbian president of Yugoslavia. NATO had launched air strikes against Yugoslav troops under Milosevic's command. Meanwhile, Milosevic was holding three American POWs. The Reverend Jesse Jackson wanted to go to Belgrade to meet with Milosevic and plead for the freedom of the Americans. As the only Serb in Congress, Blagojevich knew he could get that meeting, and his fluency in Serbian would help in negotiating. He approached Jackson through his son Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. Arrangements were made to go—despite the opposition of the Clinton Administration, which stressed that the safety of Jackson and Blagojevich could not be guaranteed and that NATO would not stop bombing just because they were there.

Before dawn on their first night at the Hyatt Belgrade, a precision bomb "took out a huge building," recalls John Wyma, who accompanied his boss. The men were staying at opposite sides of the hotel, and at 3 a.m. Blagojevich awakened Wyma with a phone call. "Are you seeing this, man? Are you seeing this?" Wyma went to Blagojevich's room, where he found the congressman in his running shorts watching the destruction out his window as if it were a special effects extravaganza.

At 4:45 that morning, accompanied by a cameraman from HBO, the congressman and his chief of staff went jogging through the streets of Belgrade. Despite the danger, Blagojevich says, he found the experience full of poignancy. He could not stop thinking, "I'm standing probably where my father [had stood]."

The next day they had their meeting with Milosevic, who offered to release just one G.I. According to friends of the governor's, Milosevic seemed far more interested in Blagojevich than in Jackson, which irritated the civil rights leader. "Why are you all taken with him?" Jackson is said to have asked. "He's your homeboy." Jackson then explained that Blagojevich would have voted for the bombing had he been in Washington—the tie vote in the House, which, in effect, withheld support for the NATO air strikes, occurred as the minister and the congressman were en route. "My son," Jackson said, "voted against the bombing." For the next half-hour, Blagojevich tried to explain to Milosevic the meaning "homeboy."

Eventually, Milosevic released all three POWs. Blagojevich knew that he would be elbowed out of the way by Jackson as soon as the TV cameras rolled, and he professed not to mind. But his father-in-law minded a lot. "Rod didn't hog the front page like he could have and should have because Rod put it all together," Mell says today.

But Blagojevich was looking to the future, and he understood that the successful trip would help him in a run for governor. As one former alderman says, "When Mell came around asking people for contributions, [he'd boast], 'This isn't just some child. This is the guy we see on the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.'"

* * *

At first the rookie governor seemed like a student council president tossed into the real thing. Rich Miller, who writes the insider's newsletter *Capitol Fax*, called Blagojevich's first 100 days "perhaps the worst run, worst managed" since Dan Walker's in 1973. Walker later spent time in prison and the Democrats endured 26 years of exile from the top spot. But just when other politicians might have been thinking of raising money to run in 2006, Blagojevich started to gain traction by appearing to reduce a \$5-billion deficit—"the worst fiscal crisis in Illinois history," he called it. He kept his promise not to raise taxes, but the financial arrangement has since been dogged by suggestions that he did it with gimmicks and that the structure would crumble, leaving the state's ledgers in worse shape than before.

Reporting on the ins and outs of the budget gave way to front-page coverage of juicy battles between the governor and members of his own party—Jesse White, apoplectic when Blagojevich broke a handshake promise and slashed the secretary of state's budget; senate president Emil Jones Jr., furious when Blagojevich used his amendatory veto to change the ethics bill, giving himself the power to appoint an inspector general; Michael Madigan, and much of the state's liberal establishment, outraged when Blagojevich rewrote a section of a death penalty reform bill. The governor cut wording that would have made it easier to discipline police officers who lied on the witness stand—an effort, his critics charged, to play up to the police union at the risk of unraveling the entire bill and its monumental reforms.

The standing joke became that Blagojevich was in perpetual campaign mode and that someone needed to tell him that he already had the job. But talk that Blagojevich has his eye on another job, the Presidency, has trailed him for years.

Mike Ascaridis, who recalls his 13-year-old friend saying, "I wouldn't mind being President someday," sounds convinced that Blagojevich plans to run at some point.

"He really is very smart," says Jan Schakowsky. "I don't laugh at that idea [of his running for President] at all."

To Bill Lipinski, Blagojevich is an obvious player: "He's 46 years of age, governor of one of the largest states of the Union," Lipinski notes. "It would be surprising if he doesn't think of running for President."

"I like my job as governor," Blagojevich says. "If I do a great job as governor, then opportunities present themselves. If I don't, then it's moot."

One thing is certain: Blagojevich had a grand time in Hollywood last June. Still bursting with excitement a few weeks after his return, he launched into a monologue describing a small dinner at which celebrities could make a campaign contribution. Calls came in from actors James Caan and Sylvester Stallone, whose movies *The Godfather* and *Rocky* are the governor's all-time favorites.

He and Stallone made plans to see each other the next day, but in the meantime, according to Blagojevich's account, he told the actor, "It's just a thrill talking to you, and now that I have you on the phone, let me tell you how much I've admired you over the years. Especially, of course, *Rocky*—your creativity where you had to believe in something, your courage to be able to do it."

And then, Blagojevich recalled, he quoted for Stallone from the LP soundtrack of *Rocky*: "You wanted a symphony of powerful men and lonely women, of human ships that crash in the night." And Stallone told Blagojevich, "Wow! Gray Davis never said that to me."

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