

In a serious jam: Can the GOP topple this guy?

By Terry Barnich

It turns out former Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar did Republicans here a favor by refusing to seek the party's gubernatorial nomination. Sure, he would have cleared the GOP field and stood a better-than-even chance of deposing Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who appears politically vulnerable despite (or maybe because of) his bulging war chest. But while winning is the object of the exercise in electoral politics, it shouldn't be the reason for engaging in the exercise in the first place. Governing is.

An Edgar candidacy was the no-brainer option for a party out of power; it had a strong scent of victory about it. And to some, the remaining field of Republican contenders looks, well, smaller by comparison. But Edgar's demurrer gives Republicans who want to recapture the Illinois governor's office the opportunity to construct a reason for winning: to govern effectively. That would remind us why we're Republicans and why voters who are uncomfortable wearing the GOP label should at least entrust the running of the government to us.

Political candidates often seem implausible holders of the offices they seek, but it's axiomatic (with the painful exception of Alan Keyes) that candidates gain plausibility by virtue of winning a nomination. Where Edgar would probably have made Blagojevich look implausible by virtue of comparative seriousness, the

next Republican nominee must actively convince voters that a Republican will be better at governing.

The Illinois GOP, as diminished as it is, needs to promote an agenda of governing prescriptions based on Republican principles that makes a compelling case for a change in Springfield.

Republicans should champion policies that will create an economic environment that will create jobs and reward prosperity. Because of steep taxation and heavy-handed regulation, Illinois does not foster an environment that encourages job growth. Forbes magazine recently ranked Illinois as the fourth least friendly state in the nation to do business in, tied with Mississippi.

Consequently, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Illinois' per-capita income level was abysmal in 2004, ranking 46th in the nation. And U.S. census figures show that during Blagojevich's term, Illinois' growth in gross state product, the value of all goods and services produced here, settles in the anemic lower 40th percentile, again behind Mississippi.

The Republican nominee should target policies that make it easier for small businesses to prosper. Too often the party has been the handmaiden for big business. But it is the small-business sector that accounts for the lion's share of innovation and that sector is the jobs engine of our economy. It is these "Main Street"

businesses, according to the Illinois chapter of the National Federation of Independent Businesses, that feel most unwelcome in Illinois. In a September survey, only 6 percent of Illinois small businesses felt the state's business environment was supportive. Blagojevich is not to blame for everything, but he has not made creating private-sector jobs a priority, and the results reflect it. The Republican nominee needs to make the case that he or she has a plan to reinvigorate Main Street because of what it means to all Illinoisans.

End the corruption that is the Illinois state budget. The

state's budget over the last three years has been restructured into a series of shameful Ponzi schemes. And here Blagojevich is primarily to blame.

He is responsible for diverting more than \$2 billion from state pensions to fund ongoing state operations. And the price tag will balloon well beyond that because the forgone investment income will also have to be made up over the years. Blagojevich has forced state employees, for the first time in Illinois history, to make cash contributions at the very same time he is reneging on the share he is bound to provide.

The governor is forcing med-

ical providers—from corner pharmacies to home-visit nurses and neighborhood doctors—to move from being state vendors to being state lenders. Payment delays have been strung out for months, forcing many businesses to the financial brink.

Hundreds of millions of dollars in fees collected for specific state funds and intended for many important functions, such as homeland security and emergency communications, have been siphoned into the general state fund. And there is no plan for repayment.

Blagojevich has added thousands of new clients to the

Medicaid system with no plan for how to pay for them. The Medicaid system is eating taxpayers alive and in a few years is bound to go bust.

Republicans must persuade voters to trust them to run the government. That starts by declaring that they will end the process of balancing the state budget by robbing Peter to pay Paul.

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Tribune photo by Chuck Berman

Will Gov. Rod Blagojevich's \$14 million war chest scare off potential challengers?

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