

BLAGOJEVICH SCANDAL

Latest smears prove Obama foes getting desperate



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WASHINGTON

With the economic rescue package creeping toward \$1-trillion – Lordy! – the last thing Barack Obama needs is an ethics controversy. But some Republicans are determined to create one, even though others think the GOP should leave Blagojevich-gate alone.

Right-wing critics are having a tough time constructing a line of attack against the wildly popular president-elect.

Rasmussen reports in its daily tracking poll that Mr. Obama enjoys a 27-per-cent gap between voters who strongly approve of how he is preparing for the presidency, and those who strongly disapprove. There has been a sharp drop in recent weeks in the strongly disapprove number, which suggests that even voters who

didn't support Mr. Obama initially want him to succeed in a time of national economic emergency.

The Wall Street Journal reported Saturday that the president-elect's economic advisers now believe the administration's planned economic stimulus package could reach \$1-trillion over two years, double the expectation of two weeks ago. It makes the \$100-billion stimulus that the Democrats originally proposed seem positively quaint.

Given all this, a seamy scandal involving the Illinois Governor's alleged demands for kickbacks before naming a temporary replacement for Mr. Obama's vacated Senate seat might seem like a foolish distraction. But a distraction it is nonetheless.

The Republican National Committee has taken the lead in trying to link Mr. Obama to Mr. Blagojevich, releasing a video yesterday entitled: "Questions remain."

Actually, not many do. It is clear Mr. Obama never spoke with Mr. Blagojevich after the election – the two men were rivals in Chicago politics, not allies – and there is not a shred of

evidence to suggest anyone in the Obama campaign negotiated with the Governor over anything.

Quite the opposite: a careful read of the obscenity-laced criminal complaint against Mr. Blagojevich makes this much quite clear: in wiretapped conversations, the Governor revealed that he was in big financial trouble. He also faced possible impeachment. He wanted out of the job of Governor, and conspired with his aides to present Mr. Obama with a choice: in exchange for selecting the president-elect's preferred candidate for the Senate, Mr. Obama must ensure that Mr. Blagojevich secures a high-paying job, either within the administration or at a non-profit enterprise. (The president-elect was expected to pressure the non-profit to hire Mr. Blagojevich.) Press reports indicated that Mr. Obama's new chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, did meet with Mr. Blagojevich to suggest which individuals Mr. Obama preferred for the interim appointment.

But whatever the Governor might have proposed as a quid pro quo came to naught, for

Mr. Blagojevich later rages that Mr. Obama's people were "not willing to give me anything but appreciation." He rejects that offer, calling the president-elect a word that really doesn't need to appear in print.

Nonetheless, critics are lambasting Mr. Obama for not being more forthcoming with a complete accounting of who-said-what-to-whom, even though the president-elect said last week that he was compiling exactly that and would release it in due course.

"While it is encouraging that the president-elect has stated his office will disclose contacts with the scandal-ridden Governor, it remains disappointing that his actions are in response to political pressure," said Mike Duncan, Republican National Committee Chairman.

This was a bit much for, of all people, John McCain, who is rapidly recovering from being the Republican presidential nominee.

With "all due respect to the Republican National Committee and anybody, right now, I think we should try to be working constructively together, not only on an issue such as this, but on the economy, stimulus

package, reforms that are necessary," Mr. McCain told George Stephanopoulos yesterday on ABC's *This Week*.

"I don't know all the details of the relationship between president-elect Obama's campaign or his people and the Governor of Illinois, but I have some confidence that all the information will come out," Mr. McCain said. "It always does, it seems to me."

Mr. McCain, who need no longer bear the load of trying to tarnish the incoming Democratic administration, perhaps underestimates the daunting challenges facing Republicans seeking to discredit Mr. Obama in the eyes of the nation.

After all, his cabinet picks have been uniformly praised as diverse, pragmatic and highly qualified.

Most economists agree that an unprecedented stimulus is the only hope for lessening and ultimately reversing what could be the worst recession since the Great Depression, giving Mr. Obama an opportunity to swiftly implement landmark reforms in infrastructure, energy, health care and education.

Under such circumstances, critics must take what they can

get. Implying a false syllogism – there is corruption in Illinois politics; Barack Obama is from Illinois; Barack Obama must be corrupt – probably won't get Republicans and conservative commentators any further than they got by claiming Mr. Obama consorted with domestic terrorist (well, actually university professor) William Ayers.

Until Mr. Blagojevich came along, however, the best the blogosphere could fabricate was a ludicrous conspiracy that Mr. Obama is not a "natural born" citizen, and therefore constitutionally prohibited from assuming the presidency.

Why? Because his father was Kenyan. Or Mr. Obama allegedly renounced his citizenship while living in Indonesia. Or he was born in Africa, and his birth certificate is a forgery. Take your pick.

Various individuals have launched lawsuits in search of a judge who will issue an injunction before the inaugural, thus far without success.

No wonder the Republicans leapt on the Blagojevich scandal, despite the lack of any tangible connection to the incoming president. Come on, they're dying here.

AFRICA



A worker carries a mattress during the building of the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village, which is scheduled to open today. PHOTO COURTESY OF AGAHOZO

IN BRIEF

Somali President fires PM, accuses him of treason

Mogadishu – Somalia's President fired his Prime Minister yesterday and accused him of paralyzing the government with "corruption, inefficiency and treason."

Hours later, as the government veered toward collapse, Islamic insurgents held a brazen news conference in the capital and vowed never to negotiate with the leadership.

The Prime Minister promised to challenge his dismissal, saying the President lacked the authority to fire him. The President said Somalia itself lacked a legal government because too many ministers have already resigned. » AP

Thailand set to vote to replace ousted PM

Bangkok – Thailand's parliament votes for a new prime minister today, with the opposition Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva the favourite to emerge at the head of a weak coalition government as the economy flirts with recession.

The parliament vote comes two weeks after courts sacked PM Somchai Wongsawat, brother-in-law of ousted leader Thaksin Shinawatra, after his People Power Party was found guilty of fraud in the December, 2007, election that brought it to power. » Reuters

Hamas raises possibility of extending truce

Gaza City – Hamas leaders in Gaza yesterday left open the possibility of renewing a tenuous truce with Israel that is due to expire Friday, putting themselves at odds with a statement by the exiled political leader of the group in Damascus.

Khaled Mashal, the exiled leader, told Hamas's Al Quds satellite station that "the truce was limited to six months and ends on Dec. 19." But Mahmoud Zahar, a senior Hamas leader in Gaza, said the group had not made its position final. » NYT

Widespread power loss still hitting northeast U.S.

Jaffrey, N.H. – More than 600,000 homes and businesses still lacked power yesterday afternoon in upstate New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine after an ice storm knocked out electrical service to 1.4 million people late last week. Utilities in hardest-hit New Hampshire said power might not be totally restored until Thursday or Friday. » AP

Home based on Jewish principles to help Rwandan genocide orphans

BY NICOLE KALLMEYER KIGALI

Rwandan genocide survivor Innocent Gisanura doesn't know much about Judaism, but the counsellor at a new home for genocide orphans can explain the Jewish philosophies of *tikkun halev* and *tikkun olam*.

"The first is healing the heart, the second is healing the world," he said.

These are the guiding principles of Agahozo Shalom Youth Village, built amid the undulating rural landscape of Rwanda's Rwamagana district, 50 kilometres from the capital of Kigali.

The 57-hectare village opens its gates for the first time today to 125 orphans of the genocide that killed more than 800,000 Rwandans in 1994. "These children faced many problems some years ago in this country and they have wounds of mind, wounds of heart," Mr. Gisanura said.

Since the genocide, several organizations and orphanages have emerged to assist the country's estimated 1.35 mil-

lion orphans and vulnerable children, one of the largest orphan populations in the world. But less than 1 per cent of these children have received the medical, educational, social and emotional support they need, according to a 2007 report by the Rwandan government.

Agahozo Shalom is trying to address this gap by adopting methods of rehabilitation from the Yemin Orde Youth Village, founded in Israel in 1953 to care for orphans of the Holocaust.

Like Yemin Orde, Agahozo Shalom has houses on one side of the property and a school on the other. Children's education and home lives are separate, a departure from traditional boarding schools. Both villages employ counsellors to run after-school activities and provide children with emotional support.

Agahozo Shalom will recreate a family life for orphans by placing them in a house with 15 other children and one house mother, herself a widow of the genocide. When the

children heard about their new living situation, they expressed excitement over the opportunity to use the word "mom" again, head house mother Augusta Mukasengoga said.

The objective is to restore a sense of belonging and security at home, which many children lack in orphanages or in the homes of extended family or friends.

Jean Pierre Nkuranga, Agahozo Shalom's head of informal education, explained that most orphans are not legally adopted in Rwanda. They can be rejected from guardians' homes at any time, and often they face neglect or harassment.

Mr. Nkuranga, who interviewed all the candidates, holds back tears when talking to teenage girls who endure sexual abuse by their caretakers to keep a roof over their heads. "There is no protection," he said.

The challenges for orphans continue at school; many guardians are reluctant to pay for books, clothes and trans-

portation. And in Rwanda's estimated 100,000 child-headed households, orphans often forgo or delay school to earn enough money for food and shelter.

"These kids are very courageous," said Mr. Nkuranga, who is a genocide survivor and has spent the past seven years working in organizations dedicated to improving orphans' lives.

Each year, a new group of 120 teenagers will arrive at Agahozo, begin Grade 9 and go through all four years of high school. The teachers are currently training in Jerusalem at the Feuerstein Institute, which has developed specific techniques for educating traumatized children. After-school activities will include sports, music, art, drama, farming and cooking, and students will be encouraged to volunteer in the surrounding district.

"It's very important to see that we'll be part of this community," Agahozo's director Nir Lahav said, adding that the village will support its neighbours by purchasing their pro-

duce.

Agahozo has secured corporate sponsorship from Liquidnet Holdings, a New York-based financial technology firm, and donations predominantly from American individuals and foundations, to meet its projected budget of \$20-million (U.S.) for the next four years, but attempts are being made to slowly phase out foreign funding and oversight.

"The idea is to have a sustainability plan and Rwandese run it," Mr. Lahav said.

Although Agahozo is introducing Rwanda to foreign ideas and methods, there has been no local resistance, said project founder Anne Heyman. In fact, many Rwandans have welcomed a Jewish initiative in the country because of their shared history of genocide.

"Here we lost leadership when the genocide took place," Mr. Nkuranga said. "I hope that kids who graduate will be special for this country; they will be the leaders." » Special to The Globe and Mail

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