



SPECIAL FOR PURIM:

America's Most Bizarre and Corrupt Politicians

- Aryeh Cohen



Many believe that it takes a good head to represent the general public. The sad truth, though, is that many state and US congressmen hardly stand out for their intelligence... or character—unless you mean in the negative sense. Samuel Johnson, writing 200 years ago, described Congress as a meeting place for “swindlers and fools.” Perhaps he did a disservice to swindlers and fools by comparing politicians to them. In this article you will meet some of the politicians who have stood out most during the past decade for their naiveté, blundering or just plain, old-fashioned crookedness. Believe it or not, a number of them won reelection with no difficulty!

A Look at America's Strangest, Most Foolish and Most Corrupt Politicians in the Past Decade



Name: Rod “Blago” Blagojevich
Party: Democrat
Position: Governor of Illinois
Claim to Fame: Selling a Senate Seat While the FBI Listened

It was just before 6 AM on Tuesday, December 9, 2008, when a group of black cars and an SUV pulled up at the home of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich in the Ravenside Manor section of Chicago. The governor and his family were still fast asleep. They had spent the last few days preparing to celebrate the governor’s upcoming 52nd birthday.

That moment the telephone rang. After several rings the governor finally picked up. When he spoke he sounded tired and angry.

“Hello. Who’s calling here so early?”

“This is Robert Grant, the FBI chief for Chicago. We have a court order for your arrest on corruption charges.”

“Is this some sort of joke?” the governor asked in an even angrier tone.

“No,” Grant responded. “I’m very serious. Two of my agents are standing at your front door. They have the arrest warrant with them. Please open the door and let them inside.”

“You want to arrest the governor of Illinois like a common criminal?!” Blagojevich spat out in a fury.

“Sir, the decision was made by US Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald. For your own good open the door quietly. Don’t wait for the media to discover what’s happening or for your children to wake up.”

With those words Grant finally convinced the unrepentant governor to cooperate. Blagojevich dressed in a hurry and headed down to the first floor of his mansion. The

black FBI vehicles were waiting outside his home, alongside the vehicles belonging to the governor’s bodyguards. Outside, it was still pitch black and a heavy rain was soaking the city.

The federal agents quickly explained the situation to the governor’s security guards and the state troopers who always guarded the governor’s mansion. With no other choice, the security officials stepped outside and allowed the federal agents to enter unhindered. Inside, the FBI men handcuffed the governor and arrested him. The Blagojevich children and the unsuspecting media slept through the entire incident.

The arrest of a US governor like a common outlaw was a rather unusual event. In general, when elected officials are arrested (which, by the way, is not all that unusual) they are permitted to come down



Eccentric Rod Blagojevich, disgraced former governor.



Blagojevich with President Bush (Obama’s former chief of staff Rahm Emanuel is visible on right.)

to the station and turn themselves in of their own volition rather than be handcuffed in public view. The fact that federal prosecutor Fitzgerald ordered Blagojevich arrested in his own home indicated that the accusations and evidence against him were very serious.

Selling Obama’s Senate Seat

Americans woke up that morning to the shocking news that the governor of Illinois, along with his chief of staff John Harris, was arrested. They were charged with the unheard-of crime of trying to sell the Senate seat of then president-elect Barack Obama.

Plenty of criminals had been guilty of extreme gall in the past. But selling a seat in the Senate for money—especially the one belonging to the president-elect—raised the art of criminality to a new level. This was one form of corruption nobody in America had ever attempted before.

The fact that the governor’s name was unfamiliar and hard to pronounce for many Americans led to the nickname “Blago.” His arrest was the culmination of a three-year FBI investigation into a series of corrupt activities. As FBI Chief Robert Grant later explained, investigators who listened to Blagojevich’s telephone conversations were shocked to hear the governor—who was well aware that he was under federal investigation and his phone conversations were no longer private—discussing plans to sell Obama’s then soon-to-be-vacant seat in the US Senate!

Apparently, the scandal began shortly before the national election. The right to fill a vacant seat in Congress is part of the executive power of most states’ governors. Blagojevich realized that he, as governor, had the power to choose his senator’s successor. However, instead of basing his decision on merit, he decided to fatten his pockets and sell the seat to the highest bidder. Along these lines he developed with his equally disreputable top aides a three-pronged plan:

1. If they could find someone who was ready to pay the right price, be it cash or



Mug shot of Blagojevich after his arrest.



Surrounded by union leaders, “Blago” announces his victory in the 2002 gubernatorial election.



With Obama.

a well-paid job offer, that person would get the seat.

2. If they could not find a candidate willing to pay a fair price, Blagojevich would agree to appoint the candidate of Obama’s choice, but only if Obama promised Blago a cabinet position or at least a