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OPINION

The heart of Blago

BY RICH LOWRY

When Franklin Roosevelt was pounding on the evils of business at the height of the New Deal, the great economist John Maynard Keynes tried to pull him back: "It is a mistake to think businessmen are more immoral than politicians."

At a time when the titans of American finance have become synonymous in the public mind with recklessness and greed, here comes Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich to confirm Keynes' long-ago wisdom. Mr. Blagojevich's greed wasn't just open and ham-fisted, it was remarkably petty — one scheme he discussed was selling President-Elect Barack Obama's Senate seat for a mere \$150,000 annual salary for his wife on a corporate board. If that's all Mr. Blagojevich could get for a coveted Senate seat, he wasn't even very good at corruption.

That he was from Chicago was key. The city has never had a reform movement that has overturned the old-school, ethnic-based machine politics. It used to be said that Chicago was the only East European city governed by Irishmen. Its politics became more open by cutting new groups into the loot. Mr. Blagojevich's conversations were probably most

spectacular for having been caught on tape, not for their F-bomb-laden, grossly self-interested nature.

All of this would represent a threat to Mr. Obama only if his team were caught up in deal-making with Mr. Blagojevich. Mr. Obama denies it, and Mr. Blagojevich cursed Mr. Obama for offering nothing but "appreciation" in return for offering to appoint his favored candidate, Mr. Obama's long-term aide Valerie Jarrett. But the scandal is a reminder of the dirty Chicago political ether through which Mr. Obama rose without a trace — never challenging the corruption — in the course of a career notionally devoted to reforming politics.

One of the most intriguing questions about Mr. Obama in the mess is, "What made him think Valerie Jarrett was qualified to be appointed to the U.S. Senate?" Mr. Obama clearly wanted to reward a friend. Hey, that's how politics works.

It'll be interesting how the natural transactional aspect of politics is distinguished in the Blagojevich case from rank criminality. Was it a crime for Senate Candidate 5, Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., allegedly to offer to raise \$500,000 for Mr. Blagojevich in exchange for the Senate appointment, or just an overly explicit act of nor-

mal horse-trading?

If Mr. Blagojevich's instinct for enrichment rose to criminality, it's hardly unusual. Even the most impeccably liberal scourges of greed manage to get rich quickly after public life. In a 2½-year period between working in Former President Bill Clinton's White House and running for Congress, Mr. Obama's new chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, made \$16.2 million in investment banking at the small firm of Wasserstein Perella. All it took, surely, was hard work, a little luck — and knowing Clinton fundraiser and Wall Street mogul Bruce Wasserstein.

As the debate over private-sector excess and greed continues, it's useful to remember most politicians have an inner Blagojevich — because they are just as human as the private malefactors they denounce. To paraphrase the late Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the line between good and evil doesn't run between the public and private sector but "through the heart of every man." Especially in Chicago. ■

Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

GUEST OPINION

End of the oughts, start of the teens



danRATHER

Special to Florida Weekly

The beginning of 2009 is in sight, and the end of the '00s is at hand.

We Americans tend to think of our popular culture in decadal terms: "The Fifties," "The Eighties" and so on, with each span conjuring up its own stew of fashions, songs and movies in the mind's eye. Since this way of thinking is ultimately more about retrospective attempts to capture a national mood or spirit of the times than it is about historical precision, the images and events we summon don't always line up with the round-numbered years. It has been noted, for instance, that when we think of "The Sixties" in terms of music, we are usually talking about little more than a five-year stretch, from The Beatles' arrival in 1964 to Woodstock in 1969.

In political terms, however, The Sixties started right on time, with the youthful John F. Kennedy taking the torch from the quintessential Fifties political icon, President Dwight David "Ike" Eisenhower. The current decade, which some call "The Oughts," had a similarly prompt beginning, with the disputed 2000 presidential election the perfect open-

ing scene to the division, paranoia and bare-knuckled executive spin to come — but this decade's curtain is falling a year early.

And not just the political decade, but the decade as a whole. With the other elements of popular culture too balkanized to garner mass recognition (perhaps the biggest identifiable trends of The Oughts have been the nonstop arrival and departure of niche "microtrends" ... and blogging — generally by and for devotees of these same microtrends), the Bush presidency has had the decadal stage pretty much to itself.

Like all snap historical judgments, this is subject to revision, but when one looks back on this decade in future years, it seems likely one will think of 9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina, the ongoing financial meltdown and little else — all framed and surmounted by the actions and reactions of the Bush White House.

When 12:01 p.m. of Jan. 20, 2009, rolls around, we will still be at war with the perpetrators of 9/11, American troops will still be in Iraq and Afghanistan, New Orleans will remain forever changed, and our economy will still (almost certainly) be in shambles. But George Bush will no longer be president. Mentally and emotionally, America will be looking, as we are already, to the next era. For better or worse, "The Teens" — or, at very least, "The Tweens" — will

have begun.

We can only guess what woes or good fortune may befall us in this next era. Will The Teens — and their new president — remain overshadowed by the geopolitical and economic challenges imposed by The Oughts? Or will policy and politics cede the decade's spotlight to stunning new scientific developments or exciting new movements in the arts? There will be "change," to be sure, but don't believe those who say they know exactly what form that change will take.

If we are to venture guesses, we can only do so in reaction to what has come before. In this spirit, we might imagine that The Teens will be, in their earliest years, characterized by thrift at home (look for a mass return to the DIY — "Do It Yourself" — aesthetic) and a self-conscious desire for comity and multilateralism abroad. In all spheres, one can bank on a widespread yearning for that legendary decade known as "The Good Old Days," the precise dates of which correspond to the childhood years of whoever is doing the yearning.

For a nation on the verge of a new era, the picture remains unclear. But for individual Americans facing a new year, the hopes stay the same: Peace, Health and Happiness — and these I wish to you in this holiday season and in the year to come. ■