

RAHM'S PLACEHOLDER, FORREST CLAYPOOL?

Remember how, in December and January, there were hints that Rahm Emanuel had been trying (in November) to get Rod Blagojevich to help set up a placeholder in his seat, so he could serve as Chief of Staff for two years and then return to the House and run for Speaker?

Well, Blago has repeated and elaborated on that story in a book and the Sun-Times has investigated Blago's claims in a fascinating article. The Sun-Times reports that Blago claims Rahm asked Blago to appoint Cook County Commissioner Forrest Claypool to his seat; Blago further claims that Rahm told Claypool he could have a Cabinet appointment when he stepped aside to reopen Rahm's seat for him after two or four years.

I'm interested in this story partly for the way it would fill out the timeline of Rahm's and Blago's contacts. Here's the chronology the Sun-Times describes.

According to Blagojevich's recently released book, *The Governor*, Blagojevich and Emanuel spoke Nov. 7 and 8. They discussed Blagojevich appointing a "placeholder," for the congressional seat, according to the book.

[snip]

Claypool's announcement that he would not seek Emanuel's seat came Nov. 12, just days after the discussion between Emanuel and Blagojevich.

On the same day as Claypool's announcement, Jarrett publicly pulled herself out of contention for the Senate seat. She is now a top adviser to the president.

And here's how that makes the timeline look

(I've underlined the new information):

November 6: Rahm Emanuel accepts Chief of Staff position; Blago gives a leak to Michael Sneed designed "to send a message to the [Obama] people" that Madigan might get the Senate seat over Jarrett

November 6-8: Louanner Peters called Eric Whitaker to ask who spoke for Obama regarding his preferences for his replacement; Obama told Whitaker no one had that authority, which Whitaker "relayed" this to Peters

November 6-8: Rahm has "one or two" conversations with Blago, about his own seat, as well as Senate seat [note, Blago says one happened on November 7 and one happened on November 8]; Rahm has four conversations with John Harris about the Senate seat

November 7: Rahm and Blago talk about the Senate seat and about appointing a placeholder; Blago tells Advisor A he's willing to "trade" the Senate seat for Secretary of HHS; Blago discusses HHS with Harris and Advisor B and talks about 3-way deal with SEIU; Tom Balanoff (local SEIU head) tells Valerie Jarrett that Blago asked whether he might be named HHS; in the same conversation, Balanoff told Jarrett he had talked to Blago about Jarrett for the Senate seat; Balanoff mentioned that Blago had also mentioned Madigan

November 8: Rahm and Blago talk about the Senate Seat and about appointing Claypool as placeholder

November 9: Valerie Jarrett withdraws from consideration; Obama talks about Senate candidates with Rahm, with the understanding he would pass on those candidates

November 10: Long Blago conference call about the seat, including discussions about a non-profit in exchange for the seat; Blago admits he's not going to get HHS; Blago plants leak with Sneed about Jesse Jackson Jr.

November 11: Blago complains that, "they're not willing to give me anything except appreciation"

November 12: Both Jarrett and Claypool publicly withdraw from consideration; Blago notes that CNN has reported Jarrett is uninterested in Senate seat; Blago talks to Balanoff, probes about whether Jarrett is interested in Senate seat and proposes 401c4; Balanoff says he will "put that flag up and see where it goes"

November 13: Blago says he wants to be able to call Rahm and say, "this has nothing to do with anything else we're working on but the Governor wants to put together a 501(c)(4)" and that when Rahm "asks me for the Fifth CD thing I want it to be in his head"; Blago then asks Advisor A to have Individual A (believed to be John Wyma, who is cooperating with Fitzgerald) propose the 501c4 to Rahm; Advisor A says, "while it's not said this is a play to put in play other things" and Blago agrees

[November 13 is the last reference to negotiations with Obama's team in the complaint]

Now, I have no idea whether Blago's timeline is more accurate than Rahm's, though there are two reasons to think it might be. First, because Rahm's vague explanations were never credible. By the time Greg Craig worked on the report on Obama appointee contacts about the Senate seat, Rahm would have reviewed his cell phone records and known precisely what dates he spoke with

Blago. The only question would have been whether or not the Senate seat came up, or whether their conversation pertained solely to other issues (and therefore were not included in the scope of the Obama Administration review of contacts with Blago).

Also, presumably Blago has since seen transcripts of his calls from this period as part of discovery, and would not want to include anything in his book that would hurt his credibility with a jury come next June, when his case will be tried. So presumably, Blago has a better idea than Rahm of what they talked about generally than Rahm and (in spite of his earlier grandstanding on this case, an incentive to get things right).

Which is not to say Blago's not spinning the known content of those conversations and elaborating on comments to try to incriminate Rahm. Blago has already done some of that and I am convinced that Blago will be doing a great deal of that next June in an effort to—at the least—go down fighting.

But for the moment, let's assume the chronology here is accurate: showing that Rahm and Blago spoke about the Congressional and Senate seats on November 7 and 8, and showing that Claypool publicly withdrew from consideration for the seat on November 12, the same day Jarrett withdrew from consideration for the Senate seat.

That would suggest Rahm's conversations with Blago about the Senate seat were much more tightly intertwined with Tom Balanoff's outreach on behalf of Jarrett to Blago on the seat. But it might also suggest that something—the same thing, presumably—got Rahm and Jarrett and Claypool scared off all at the same time, in time for both Jarrett and Claypool to withdraw from consideration on November 12. Which makes Blago's conversation from November 13 all the more interesting, since it suggests (at least in the narrative Blago's now trying to spin) that Rahm and Claypool had already backed off "that 5th CD thing" by the time Blago tried to pitch a

401c4 to Rahm (via John Wyma) to launder the favors for the Senate seat.

Now, like I said, I suspect Blago's working vaguely with the truth, but I also suspect he is spinning it in a way so as to be maximally damaging to Rahm. That said, neither Claypool nor the White House rebut this claim very convincingly. The Sun-Times notes a contradiction in Claypool's claims about his motivations.

Claypool also said he ruled out running for Emanuel's seat a week after the Nov. 4 presidential election because he was poised to pose a strong challenge to Cook County Board President Todd Stroger, whose approval rating has been tanking.

But earlier this year, Claypool announced he's retiring from county politics when his term as a county commissioner ends in 2010. A former chief of staff to Mayor Daley who also served as Chicago Park District chief, he said he couldn't resist leaving politics for an opportunity to found a health care company that he believes can "lower costs and increase quality of care" for consumers.

And the folks in the White House who know what went down here refused to comment.

Emanuel declined to comment, as did the White House.

Now, back in December and January, the transition team adopted a strategy whereby only the legal folks dealing with Greg Craig's limited review were fully briefed on what went on. Which means Robert Gibbs' denials don't mean much.

When the governor's book was released, the White House said it was unaware of

an allegation that Emanuel had asked Blagojevich to appoint a placeholder.

"I barely cover with Rahm what's going to happen the rest of the week. I have not talked to him about that nor have I – I've not seen the book by the indicted former governor of Illinois," White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said at the time.

Gibbs was asked whether the possibility of a placeholder ever came up during Obama's transition period before he was sworn in.

"No, not that – I do not remember any discussion about that," Gibbs said.

So we've got Rahm refusing to say anything, and Gibbs, who almost certainly was compartmented away from knowing anything, stating that he doesn't know anything.

Like I said, not very convincing stuff.

We may not know the truth on this issue until next June. But I gotta say. Every time some Obama appointee gets chased out of office for a skimpy witchhunt, I think back to how carefully Obama (and it was Obama) orchestrated the limited Greg Craig review so as to hide these embarrassing discussions between Rahm and Blago. And for all that effort, Rahm still has fucked up health care.

Update: Corrected that Blago, not Rahm, was pitching the 501c4.