

January 13, 2003 Monday, Final Markets Edition

**‘I’m ready to go’**

By Scott Fornek and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

Pledging to reject "the politics of mediocrity and corruption," Rod Blagojevich was sworn in today as Illinois' first Democratic governor in 30 years, delivering a message that, though optimistic in tone, still was laced with words and phrases such as "moment of crisis," "uncertain times" and "staggering $5 billion deficit."

"I did not run for governor to be a caretaker," Blagojevich told 5,000 dignitaries and supporters. "I did not run to manage a state of decline. I did not run to maintain the status quo. I am not here to serve just the few. ... It is time for a change.

"And make no mistake about it--today is the first day of a new beginning for Illinois."

In a 14-minute speech that was interrupted by applause 15 times, Blagojevich reiterated his pledge not to raise income or sales taxes despite what he indirectly termed Gov. George Ryan's legacy, "a staggering $5 billion deficit."

"We will balance the budget, and we will end the budget games," the new governor said. "It took years of mismanagement and waste to create the mess we now face--and it will take time and tough choices to fix it."

Blagojevich promised to help lower the cost of prescription drugs for the elderly, streamline government by consolidating agencies, eliminating patronage-laden boards and commissions and rebuilding the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority.

Blagojevich raised millions for his campaign from organized labor, but he assured the crowd he would be a "pro-growth governor" and would not ignore the needs of small businesses.

"We have a choice to make today," Blagojevich said. "We can choose to believe or we can choose to despair. We cannot let cynicism become the death knell of progress. We cannot let pessimism become a roadblock to innovation.

"The future is always made by people who believe that, here in America, anything is possible."

Blagojevich, 46, took the oath at the Capital Convention Center on a stage he shared with all living former Illinois governors except Dan Walker, the last Democrat to hold the office. Representing Walker was his wife, Roberta, and son, Dan Walker Jr.

Ryan, who upstaged Blagojevich's inaugural weekend with his issuance of blanket clemency to all those on Illinois' Death Row, received a standing ovation.

Blagojevich received his own rousing, three-minute standing ovation as he entered the packed hall with his wife, Patti, and their 6-year-old daughter, Amy.

Wearing a bright red party dress, Amy sat on her dad's lap for part of the ceremony.

Others who shared the stage with the new governor included: Mayor Daley; House Speaker Michael J. Madigan; Senate President Emil Jones; Ald. Dick Mell (33rd), Blagojevich's beaming father-in-law, and Chris Kelly, the millionaire businessman who helped Blagojevich raise his record $25 million in campaign contributions.

The two-hour ceremony was a little looser than past inaugurations, with the Jose Valdes Trio kicking things off with some Latin Jazz, and rhythm and blues singer Mavis Staples belting out a soulful a capella version of "America the Beautiful."

Offering an opening prayer was the Rev. Tom Cross, who is the father of House Minority Leader Tom Cross (R-Oswego). The junior Cross is a close friend of Blagojevich, and his father is a Methodist minister who baptized Amy Blagojevich.

Contributing: *Chris Wetterich*