

May 21, 2004 Friday

**Obama admits he dislikes his most loyal follower; Senate candidate tailed everywhere by opponent's worker**

By Dave McKinney and Scott Fornek

Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD-For the past 10 days, U.S. Senate candidate Barack Obama hasn't been able to go to the bathroom or talk to his wife on his cell phone without having a camera-toting political gofer from his Republican rival filming a few feet away.

In what has to be a first in Illinois politics, Republican Jack Ryan has assigned one of his campaign workers to record every movement and every word of the state senator while he is in public.

That means Justin Warfel, armed with a handheld Panasonic digital camcorder, follows Obama to the bathroom door and waits outside. It means Warfel follows Obama as he moves from meeting to meeting in the Capitol. And it means Warfel tails Obama when he drives to his campaign office.

"It's standard procedure to record public speeches and things like that," Obama told reporters as the bald, 20-something operative filmed away. "But to have someone who's literally following you a foot and a half away, everywhere you go, going into the restrooms, standing outside my office, sitting outside of my office asking my secretary where I am, seems to be getting a little carried away."

Warfel interrupted Obama several times with heckling questions, but wouldn't respond when reporters asked him about who he was and why he was filming Obama's every move.

"You'll have to speak to the campaign office," Warfel said tartly to practically every inquiry.

Some senior Republicans were turned off by the tactic.

"I don't care if you're in public life or who you are," Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson (R-Greenville) said. "You deserve your space, your privacy. I don't think it's appropriate."

But Jason Miller, Ryan's campaign manager, insisted Obama's public movements are fair game and the point is to make sure Obama doesn't contradict himself with his public statements.

"If he's having a phone conversation, then Justin is not trying to tap into the conversation or record what he is saying or something like that," Miller said.

"He's monitoring because you never know when ... a reporter comes up and starts asking questions."