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**With Obama around, Dems put aside bickering;**

**Blagojevich, Madigan and Jones join star nominee at State Fair**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD -- In a departure from months of acrimony, Illinois' top Democrats resisted taking potshots at one another Wednesday and focused an Illinois State Fair rally on the party's fall ticket, including its rising star and senatorial nominee, Barack Obama.

Uncharacteristically, Gov. Blagojevich, House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) and Senate President Emil Jones (D-Chicago) put their budget- and personality-driven feuding on hold while singing the virtues of Obama and presidential nominee John Kerry to hundreds of party loyalists.

"From time to time, we don't always agree on every single issue. There are some squabbles," the governor told hundreds at the sweltering fairground rally, where many waved blue-and-white Obama signs.

"But like all families, it's time to put that behind us, look to the future and unify behind the principles that make us Democrats."

Still aglow from his well-regarded, nationally televised speech at the Democratic National Convention, Obama was mobbed everywhere he went by autograph seekers and those wanting a picture taken with him.

"In my neighborhood," Secretary of State Jesse White told the Democratic faithful, "they'd say, 'Barack, you the man.' "

The state senator from Hyde Park downplayed any role his sudden popularity may have in helping focus the party on the fall elections, rather than on settling scores from a turbulent legislative session, and promised not to disregard his new GOP rival, Alan Keyes.

"To the extent I can help unify the Democrats, I'm happy to do it. But I tell you what, I've never seen them more unified," Obama said.

But Republicans ridiculed the happy face Democrats wore Wednesday.

"It's somewhat ironic that it's newsworthy they're getting along as opposed to what we've been seeing the past few months," state GOP spokesman Jason Gerwig said, citing the budgetary feuds that aligned Madigan with Republicans against Blagojevich and Jones.

Today, the GOP will hold its pep rally at the fairgrounds, with Marylander Keyes as the headliner amid uncertainties as to whether party stalwarts like former Governors Jim Edgar and James Thompson, who are dissatisfied with Keyes' selection, will even bother to show.

In anticipation of Keyes' first campaign appearance in the state capital, his short-term residency and lack of familiarity with Illinois' culture gave Democrats a plump target Wednesday.

"The Republicans will come here, and they'll have their own celebration. They'll bring their senatorial candidate," Sen Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) said. "Instead of serving pork chops, they'll be serving Maryland crab cakes. Instead of talking about the beauties of Lake Michigan, they're going to talk about the Chesapeake Bay. They're going to talk about the Baltimore Ravens and the Baltimore Orioles.

"They're going to have a great time of it," Durbin continued. "But after [today], the real campaign starts, and we have something they don't have. We've got the genuine article, Barack Obama."