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**'Gov. Grumpy,' with little to lose, pulls no punches; politically down, all but out, he speaks his mind**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD--Of all the things Gov. Ryan has been accused of, having a particularly sunny disposition isn't on the list.

In fact, as a lame duck, the Kankakee Republican has become Gov. Grumpy, willing to say or do just about anything without worrying how it might play in Peoria. His term is about up. He's got federal prosecutors on his tail. And his party has cut him loose.

In other words, he's got little to lose in dispensing the unvarnished truth as he sees it when it comes to his critics, public policy and life in general. The only restraint on his bluntness comes from his lawyers, who have cautioned him against saying anything related to the long-running corruption scandal that has swamped his administration, for fear he might perk up the ears of those with authority to issue federal subpoenas.

"George is coming off as the mean old neighbor who lived on your block who used to yell at you to get off his lawn," said one top Republican strategist, who asked not to be identified.

Ask the governor about Jim Ryan, the political underling he used to call "Jimmy" and "Cuz." The governor will tell you he probably will vote for him, but he's the "worst candidate" Illinois has ever seen.

Ask him about his lieutenant governor, Corinne Wood, who was his handpicked running mate. He won't have much to say because he hasn't given his "full and equal partner" more than 10 minutes of his time in the last year, apparently having exiled her to his blacklist.

Ask him about the GOP's nominee for secretary of state, Kris Cohn. Well, he said during a televised scolding, he's "damned disappointed" in her for handing out soap at the Illinois State Fair. So far, she has given out about 40,000 of those little bars of antibacterial Dial as part of her promise to clean up government in his wake.

Or ask him about the press. The papers and TV stations, he says, are all fixated on the licenses-for-bribes scandal to enhance their "bottom line" while deliberately ignoring his accomplishments as governor.

But if you really want to understand how crabby Ryan has become, ask him about parades. Parades? Every politician loves a parade, right? The governor will say he's fed up with them, glad he never has to march in another one and wonders why anyone would waste an afternoon watching one.

"Mean old neighbor" is perhaps one apt way to think about Ryan. Or you could think about him as "Bulworth," the tell-it-like-it-is senator that Warren Beatty portrayed in the 1998 movie "Bulworth." Beatty's character felt completely liberated to do or say anything because he was convinced he had only a few days left to live.

So it is with Ryan, whose political life comes to a close in three months. To his diminishing band of supporters, this is just vintage blunt George on display. But to other members of his own party, this is a man on a mean-spirited mission to wreck the GOP's uphill bid to extend its 26-year hold on the office of governor--a charge his top aides deny.

"He's in tremendous good humor considering all the pressures of this job," gubernatorial spokesman Dennis Culloton said. "Half of these so-called grumpy comments come from reporters who are trying to elicit just those kind of statements to help make their stories. The governor has always been pretty frank. Look at his quotes the last 30 years."

But any sense of reserve seems gone. Worried about the possibility of putting an innocent man to death, Ryan appears hell-bent on granting everyone on Death Row a life sentence despite the growing outcry from the families of crime victims.

He has gone out of his way to change various rules so that dozens if not hundreds of his loyalists will be safely locked into their state jobs after he retires in January. And he booted out the reform-oriented chairman of the Illinois Gaming Board, Gregory Jones, in favor of a political ally.

On top of all that, he's under fire from professional historians for trying to install cronies with meager backgrounds in history into positions at the new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, scheduled to open in Springfield later this year. But Ryan hasn't given up on the library jobs.

"He hasn't been shy about controversy," said an informal adviser, who has regular contact with the governor but sought anonymity. "I talked to him last week. He is pretty liberated by the fact that the game's over. It's pretty much, 'Screw everybody. I got elected. I won a four-year term, and I'm going to govern. What I can do by executive order or by executive decision, I will do. If you don't like it, it's too bad.'"

The paradox of Gov. Grumpy is that even as he remains a possible target in the federal Operation Safe Road investigation--a probe that has yielded 50 convictions for the illegal sale of driver's licenses, influence peddling in the secretary of state's office and the alleged use of state workers for politics--and could be indicted, he has been mentioned twice in one week by the New York Times as a possible candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize because of his stand on the death penalty and the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba.

The fact is, Ryan remains far more popular outside Illinois than in. Here, his approval ratings are somewhere south of Cairo and he probably couldn't win election as dogcatcher. But that hasn't stopped him from giving some of his many critics a mean headache.

Pass the Bayer to the tragically named Republican attorney general, who has been battered by his Democratic rival for governor, Rod Blagojevich, for allegedly not investigating misdoing under Ryan. The attorney general has had to spend a great deal of his campaign dueling with the sharp-tongued governor rather than with Blagojevich, allowing the Democrat to fly on automatic pilot during much of this campaign.

Jim Ryan, who has called the governor a "bitter man," has bent over backward to let voters know he and George are not the same person or in any way related. Jim Ryan, through his campaign staff, went so far as to write newspapers, urging editors to use only his first name in headlines to distinguish him from the governor. And, to no avail, he has demanded that George Ryan tell voters whether he was complicit in the licenses-for-bribes scandal or resign.

Just last week, Jim Ryan began erecting billboards in Springfield that show his face and the word "JIM" in massive letters and, at the bottom, the slogan "A governor you can trust." Nowhere will you see his politically cursed Irish surname.

While this public feuding has eased up some in the last month, it surfaced in a particularly barbed way about two weeks ago after the attorney general sued the governor over the procedures to be used in upcoming clemency hearings for Death Row inmates. George Ryan sarcastically commended Jim Ryan's "newfound concern" for justice, a jab that barely rated a mention in most news reports because the bad blood between the two men had already been so well-documented.

"The governor can say what he wants to say. There's nothing we can do to control that," said Dan Curry, a spokesman for the attorney general. "We don't spend a lot of time worrying about things we can't control."

Friends and political allies of Gov. Ryan insist he really is a warm-and-cuddly guy beneath the gruffness and that the governor merely shoots back when fired upon. In private, he continues to dine out three or four nights a week, spends much of his time with his wife, Lura Lynn, in their state-subsidized Chicago apartment, and doesn't dwell on the scandal with friends.

Over corned beef sandwiches at Manny's Deli at Jefferson and Roosevelt Road, he likes to talk about his grandkids and sports.

"George is a tough, rough, gruff guy. Or at least he sounds like it. But inside of him, he's none of those things," said former Gov. James Thompson, who is among a dwindling number of top Republicans still singing the governor's praises publicly. "He is tough. I give him credit for that. He's not the guy he appears to be. I don't think down deep he harbors ill will or lasting grudges."

At the same time, Thompson said he understands why the governor has said some of the things he has toward Jim Ryan, whom Thompson endorses and is careful not to criticize.

"If you look closely, with all of the enormous personal and political pressure, at some point if you're a human, you just say, 'Enough is enough. Say that one more time, and I'm going to answer.' God, who would want a governor who didn't have a human instinct like that?

"It may not have always been politically appropriate, but he's a human being," Thompson said of the governor.

"I think he's probably enjoying the sparring," an ex-adviser said of the governor. "Given his weakened position as a lame duck, this is an opportunity for him to get back at the guy who he thought treated him poorly. If he has an opportunity to take a dig or a shot, I don't think he has really too many reservations at this point."

But if the governor's feud with Jim Ryan has some obvious explanation, others on the receiving end of his bitterness, including the lieutenant governor, are truly perplexed. Once one of Gov. Ryan's most loyal cheerleaders, Wood saw her relationship with the governor grow distant, especially in the last year. Privately, he blew his stack when she began airing a commercial late last year that told voters she had rejected a call from him and other "party insiders" to drop out of the GOP gubernatorial primary, which she wound up losing. She insists the ad was not meant as an insult toward him.

"To have started off saying she was his 'full and equal partner' and then speaking to her less than 10 minutes in a calendar year is quite a difference," said Chris Hensley, Wood's deputy chief of staff. "Is it keeping her from doing her job? No. Does it present a number of hurdles to doing that job? Absolutely."

Ryan's wrath is rooted in the path the federal investigation has taken, first excluding him as a target, then involving his close friends and campaign fund, and now apparently zeroing in on him. Without that probe, voters and his party might not view him as a pariah, and he probably would be positioned to run for a second term.

Some who know the governor well seem to think that if he could avoid legal repercussions, he'd dearly love to turn his public venting toward federal probers, just as he has toward Jim Ryan and the little-known candidate handing out bars of soap. Indeed, if Ryan were to compose a list of enemies, those "traitors" in his party probably would be well down in the pecking order.

"This is about defending himself," a senior adviser and member of Ryan's so-called Kitchen Cabinet said. "He's got an entire lifetime devoted to nothing but government. He's not like a lot of other people who'll go off getting a big job running a law firm. This track record he has in government is his."

...AND ANOTHER THING

ON PARADES:

"I've never figured out why people like to sit along a curb all day and watch fire trucks go by, and politicians."

On Lisa Madigan: "I see Lisa Madigan [went] after her father. I'm a little disappointed that she did that."

ON THE MEDIA:

"That's all you guys think about...the scandals. You fail to see the good in anything."

ON JIM RYAN:

He has run "probably the worst campaign I've ever seen in the history of the state. . . . Jim Ryan ought to quit hiding behind me. If he hasn't distinguished himself by now, he never will."