

Republicans enlisted Department of Homeland Security in Texas political fight

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Texas state Republican officials turned to the federal Department of Homeland Security for assistance in tracking down 53 Democratic state legislators who boycotted the state House of Representatives this week to block a redistricting bill.

The unprecedented action—appealing to an agency supposedly set up to fight “terrorism” to use its power against political opponents—came after the Democratic legislators fled to Oklahoma, outside the jurisdiction of the Texas state police, and vowed not to come back until after the Thursday midnight deadline for passage of the legislation.

State investigators looking for Pete Laney, one of the boycotting Democrats, contacted the Air and Marine Interdiction Coordination Center in Riverside, Calif., on Monday, May 12, and asked officials there to help find Laney’s Piper turboprop plane, which they believed was being used to ferry escaping legislators.

The Center, part of the new federal department, monitors air traffic throughout the United States, targeting drug smuggling, terrorism and other criminal activities. In an extreme case, it can alert US air defenses to shoot down a suspect plane. Officials there said they contacted the Federal Aviation Administration and local Texas aviation agencies, and conducted a search by radar, but did not send up any federal planes. They did not find Laney’s plane, as the Democratic legislators had chartered two buses to go to Oklahoma.

Two Texas newspapers, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and the *Dallas Morning News*, described the incident, reporting that a state police investigator gave federal officials the impression that the small plane was overdue on its flight plan and might have gone missing.

A statement by the Department of Homeland Security claimed that the agency had treated the request as an air

traffic emergency: “from all indications, this request from the Texas DPS was an urgent plea for assistance from a law enforcement agency trying to locate a missing, lost or possibly crashed aircraft.”

It strains credulity, however, to believe that the Department of Homeland Security was unaware of the political controversy in Texas, or of the identity of Laney, the former speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, who was repeatedly cited by Bush, in the course of his 2000 presidential campaign, as an exemplar of bipartisan cooperation.

The Democratic state legislators returned to the state Friday, claiming victory in their effort to block the redistricting bill after the midnight deadline for its passage expired. The legislation would have redrawn the boundaries of Texas congressional districts, shifting as many as seven seats in the US House of Representatives from Democratic to Republican control.

Democratic congressmen, including some who would have lost their seats in the US House of Representatives under the redistricting plan, condemned Texas Republicans for attempting to use the anti-terrorist agency against their political opponents.

Martin Frost of Arlington, in the Dallas suburbs, said in a press interview, “Not since Richard Nixon and Watergate 30 years ago has anyone tried to use law enforcement agencies of the federal government for domestic political purposes... There should be a complete investigation.”

Jim Turner of rural east Texas, the ranking Democrat on the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, declared, “We created the Department of Homeland Security to track down terrorists, not law-abiding citizens.”

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, the Houston

Republican who spearheaded the redistricting plan, denied any contact with the Department of Homeland Security. But while the Democratic state legislators were hiding in Oklahoma, DeLay did urge the FBI to intervene in the case, since Texas state troopers could not arrest the fugitives in another state.

The incident in Texas underscores the real function of the Department of Homeland Security. Rather than protecting the American people from the threat of terrorism, it will be increasingly used by the White House and its extreme-right supporters to target domestic political opposition.

The involvement of the new federal department in a state political dispute also sheds light on the reactionary role of the Democratic Party politicians, like Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, who first proposed the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. Over the past several months, congressional Democrats have focused their criticism of the Bush administration's new budget on the allegedly inadequate provision of resources for homeland security. Now this same agency has been used against the Democratic Party itself.



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