

US: Republican Congress to pursue far-right agenda

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19 November 2004

The first action by congressional Republicans on returning to Washington after the November 2 election was to change their own ethics rules to protect House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who faces criminal indictment in a Texas campaign fundraising scandal.

Meeting in a closed-door session, and in a voice vote with no names recorded, the House of Representatives Republican caucus decided to drop an 11-year-old party rule that required members of the leadership to step aside from their positions if indicted by a state or federal grand jury.

Three former top aides to DeLay were indicted September 20 on charges of illegally raising funds from corporations for state legislative campaigns in Texas, in violation of a state law banning such donations. The three include DeLay political aide Jim Ellis, John Colyandro, executive director of DeLay's political action committee TRMPAC, and fundraiser Warren RoBold. DeLay has not yet been called before the Travis County (Austin) grand jury investigating the TRMPAC affair, but as the political action committee's political organizer, he is clearly a target.

TRMPAC played a key role in the consolidation of Republican control of the US House of Representatives. Its fundraising fueled the successful Republican campaign to win control of the Texas state legislature in the 2002 elections. The next year, the state legislature redrew the borders of the state's 33 congressional districts to guarantee a top-heavy Republican majority in its delegation to the US House of Representatives. The Republicans gained five seats in Texas in the November 2 vote, more than offsetting the loss of a handful of seats in the other 49 states.

Congressional Republicans denounced the investigation into TRMPAC by Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle, a Democrat, calling it politically motivated. Chief Deputy Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia called the investigation a "witch hunt," adding that the rule change was passed "because there is a tremendous recognition that Tom DeLay led on the issue to produce five more seats."

DeLay himself told reporters that without the rule change Democrats could "have a political hack decide who our leadership is" by arranging an indictment. He claimed that Democrats "announced years ago that they were going to engage in the politics of personal destruction, and had me as a target."

The complaint about "the politics of personal destruction" has a bizarre ring coming from the House Republicans who spearheaded the impeachment of President Bill Clinton on charges far more

flimsy than those being leveled against DeLay—and unrelated to any allegation of political corruption.

Only a month ago, the bipartisan House Ethics Committee voted unanimously to admonish DeLay for two violations, one for the appearance of vote-buying in his effort to secure passage of the Bush administration's Medicare prescription drug bill, the other related to the Texas redistricting case.

In the second case, DeLay was rebuked for calling the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and engaging its assistance when Democratic state legislators in Texas left the state as part of an unsuccessful effort to block passage of the redistricting bill. DeLay asked the FAA to track the small plane which several legislators used to fly to Oklahoma. The Democrats were seeking to avoid being detained by Texas police and compelled to fill out a quorum in the legislature.

The Ethics Committee took no action on additional charges related to the TRMPAC campaign contributions in deference to the pending criminal investigation—the same probe that the Republicans now claim is baseless.

The smell of political gangsterism and corruption around DeLay was underscored by the appearance of another former top aide, Michael Scanlon, before a hearing of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee Wednesday. Citing his constitutional right not to incriminate himself, Scanlon refused to answer questions about the \$82 million in lobbying and public relations fees which he and lobbyist Jack Abramoff collected from six Indian tribes that operate gambling casinos.

Among the allegations that have surfaced in this scandal is the claim that Scanlon enlisted Ralph Reed, former leader of the Christian Coalition and a top official in the Bush reelection campaign, to use his contacts in the religious right to get an Indian casino in Texas shut down. Scanlon and Abramoff then extracted \$4.2 million in fees from the tribe for a lobbying campaign to get the casino reopened.

None of this fazes the congressional Republican leadership, which runs a virtually dictatorial regime in the House of Representatives, taking advantage of rules that give even a narrow majority complete control over the legislative process. Following the Republican caucus meeting that immunized DeLay from the consequences of an indictment, DeLay, House Speaker Dennis Hastert and other top House Republicans declared they would push for rapid approval in the new Congress of measures such as partial privatization of Social Security, restrictions on liability lawsuits

against corporations, and fundamental tax “reform”—a euphemism for measures that would target the graduated income tax, provide new tax cuts for big business and the wealthy, and shift the tax burden even further onto the working population.

In their remarks, the Republicans did not even acknowledge the existence of the Democratic minority, let alone utter the traditional phrases about cooperation.

They claimed the 2004 election had given them a mandate to carry out their agenda, and DeLay said the Republican majority had an opportunity to change the country that might not reemerge “for generations.”

The Senate Republicans are proceeding at a somewhat different pace towards a similar goal. The principal focus there has been the imposition of a tighter internal discipline among the Republicans themselves. A combination of defections among Republican “moderates” and Senate rules that give considerable power to minorities has blocked or delayed much of the White House legislative agenda.

The Senate Republican caucus reelected all its leaders without opposition, but the main attention was on the selection of a new chairman for the Judiciary Committee, which handles nominations for federal district and appellate judges and justices of the Supreme Court. Under Senate term-limit rules, the current chairman, Republican Orrin Hatch of Utah, must step down, and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, known as a “moderate” Republican and supporter of abortion rights, would be in line to be chairman, based on seniority.

The far-right media and anti-abortion groups have been up in arms over this prospect, seizing on remarks Specter made after the election, when he warned that if Bush sought to fill a Supreme Court vacancy with an opponent of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which legalized abortion, there would likely be a successful filibuster against the nomination.

Specter has been at pains since then to explain that he was stating a fact, not making a threat, and that while he personally claims to support *Roe v. Wade*, he would have no problem confirming a Bush nominee who opposes abortion rights. These assurances have prevailed so far with his Senate colleagues, and there was no opposition voiced at the Republican caucus to Specter assuming the chairmanship of the committee. The actual vote will not take place until January, however.

There is a subtext to the story. The Senate Republican leadership is preparing to meet the anticipated filibuster of a Bush Supreme Court nominee by establishing a new procedure for shutting off debate. Once the filibuster begins, Vice President Cheney, acting as president of the Senate, would rule that a filibuster is only in order over legislation, not against a judicial nomination. Such a ruling could be upheld by only 51 votes, rather than the 60 required to halt a filibuster. The Republicans currently have a 55-44 margin in the Senate, with one independent who votes with the Democrats.

Senate Democrats have warned that if such a ruling is issued to push through a right-wing Supreme Court nominee, they will respond by bringing all Senate operations to a halt by filibustering legislation. A number of Senate Republicans have also expressed reservations about the plan, which has been labeled the “nuclear

option,” both because it tramples on 200 years of Senate precedent and because it could be used against the Republicans if they became a minority in the Senate.

The issue of the “nuclear option” could arise quite soon, given the apparently terminal cancer diagnosed in Chief Justice William Rehnquist. The campaign against Specter thus represents a preemptive move to insure that the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, who will play a key role in that effort, is fully on board.

There is an instructive political contrast between the ruthlessness and single-mindedness of the Republicans, in both House and Senate, and the bleating and hand-wringing of the Democrats. House Democrats responded to DeLay’s declaration of immunity from prosecution with a few plaintive comments.

In the Senate, the Democratic caucus chose Harry Reid of Nevada—himself an opponent of abortion rights and an advocate of a constitutional amendment to ban flag-burning—as their new minority leader. Reid began his tenure by declaring his willingness to cooperate and compromise with the Republican majority. “We realize we’re the loyal opposition,” he said. “The issues that come to the floor will be issues brought to us by the majority. We are going to do everything we can ... to improve that legislation.”

Meanwhile, Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, met for 35 minutes with Alberto Gonzales, Bush’s nominee for attorney general, and predicted that Gonzales would be confirmed with “substantial votes on both sides of the aisle” when his nomination comes before the Senate.

In his capacity as White House counsel, Gonzales is notorious for having authored memoranda that described the Geneva Convention as “quaint” and outmoded, and elaborated a legal theory for a presidential power to authorize the torture of prisoners captured in Afghanistan and Iraq. But according to Leahy, Bush’s decision to elevate Gonzales to head the Department of Justice was a political olive branch. “The president could have picked a polarizing figure,” Leahy said. “He did not. I applaud him for that.”



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