

House Republican leader indicted in campaign finance conspiracy

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In a serious blow to the Bush administration and the congressional Republican leadership, Congressman Tom DeLay stepped down as House Majority Leader Wednesday after he was indicted by a Texas grand jury on charges of conspiracy to violate state election laws.

DeLay and two political aides, John Colyandro and James W. Ellis, were charged with conspiring to funnel corporate campaign cash to Republican candidates for the Texas state legislature, in violation of a state law which prohibits direct corporate campaign contributions. Conviction on the single count carries penalties of up to two years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

DeLay issued a statement saying, "I have notified the Speaker that I will temporarily step aside from my position as majority leader pursuant to rules of the House Republican Conference and the actions of the Travis County district attorney today." House Speaker Dennis Hastert indicated that DeLay would be replaced temporarily by the No. 3 House Republican, Majority Whip Roy Blunt of Missouri.

The rules of the Republican conference make any Republican member indicted on criminal charges ineligible to hold a leadership position. The Republican House membership voted to change that rule last November, anticipating that DeLay might be indicted, but reversed itself in January after widespread negative media publicity over the ouster of the Republican chairman of the Ethics Committee, who opposed the change.

The grand jury convened by Travis County (Austin) District Attorney Ronnie Earle has been investigating a chain of events in the state and federal elections of 2002 and 2004. In the course of the 2002 campaign, according to the indictment, corporate campaign contributions were illegally directed to Republican state legislative candidates in key districts, assisting the Republican takeover of the state House and Senate.

The newly installed Republican state legislature then

radically revised the boundaries of the state's 32 federal congressional districts, using a method dubbed "cracking and packing," in which the existing districts were broken up and minority neighborhoods removed from them and "packed" into a handful of overwhelmingly Democratic districts, leaving the remaining "minority-free" districts far more favorable to Republican candidates.

Manipulation of the boundaries also forced five Democratic incumbents to run in new districts against incumbent Republican opponents. Four of the five lost in the 2004 election, and the Texas delegation in the US House of Representatives shifted from 21-11 Democratic to 17-15 Republican, a net gain of six seats for the Republicans. This more than offset the small gains made by the Democrats in the rest of the country.

There is no dispute over DeLay's central role in this process. His political aides spearheaded the state legislative campaign in 2002 with the publicly stated goal of insuring a more Republican delegation to the US House of Representatives in 2004. They solicited contributions from corporations like Sears and AT&T, although it is illegal under Texas law for corporations to make donations to the campaigns of political candidates.

Some \$190,000 in corporate cash was transferred from DeLay's campaign fund TRMPAC (Texans for a Republican Majority Political Action Committee) to the Republican National Committee (RNC) in September 2002, and amounts totaling that sum were donated by the RNC to seven Texas state legislative candidates on October 4, 2002. Copies of the checks have long been in the hands of the grand jury. TRMPAC itself was indicted for the illegal campaign contributions scheme three weeks ago.

DeLay's camp has repeatedly denounced the Austin investigation as a partisan witch-hunt, since Earle is a Democrat. At a press conference on Capitol Hill after his indictment, DeLay declared, "I have done nothing

wrong,” and denounced Earle as “a partisan fanatic” and a “rogue district attorney.”

Earle refused to comment on the details of the indictment, citing grand jury secrecy provisions, but he said that as the district attorney for Travis County, which includes the state capital, Austin, he has jurisdiction over “abuses of power,” and has prosecuted roughly equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans for campaign finance, bribery and similar political corruption cases. “The law says that corporate contributions to political campaigns are illegal in Texas,” he said. “The law makes such contributions a felony. My job is to prosecute felonies. I’m doing my job.”

DeLay’s rhetorical blast against Earle as an out-of-control, brazenly partisan prosecutor is more than a little ironic, since DeLay was the House Republican leader most fanatical in supporting the Kenneth Starr investigation and pushing the House vote to impeach President Bill Clinton in 1998, using Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky as the pretext. Unlike the Lewinsky affair, however, the DeLay investigation involves actual crimes, amounting to the subversion of the electoral process.

While DeLay stridently denounced the indictment, the response at the White House was notably lower key, indicating concern on the part of the Bush administration that the charges against the House majority leader are credible and likely to stick. Chief White House spokesman Scott McClellan made no assertion of DeLay’s innocence, but called him “a good ally and a good leader who we have worked closely with.” In contrast to DeLay’s demonization of Earle, McClellan said, “The president’s view is to let the legal process work. There’s a legal process and we’re going to let it work.”

DeLay, 58, was first elected to Congress in 1984 from a suburban Houston district. The former pesticide distributor was elected majority whip in 1994 after the Republicans won control of Congress. While DeLay did not become majority leader in 2002, he was widely regarded as the most powerful congressman after House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Dennis Hastert, who succeeded Gingrich as Speaker in 1998, was one of DeLay’s deputy whips.

The Texas indictment is the culmination of a series of ethics charges against the House majority leader. Last fall he was admonished three times by the House Ethics Committee. After issuing a perfunctory statement of regret and denying any wrongdoing, DeLay promptly

organized a purge of the committee’s Republican membership and changed the rules to block further measures against himself.

DeLay has also faced increasing scrutiny over the activities of right-wing lobbyist Jack Abramoff, whom he once described as one of his closest friends. DeLay traveled on junkets to Scotland and the Northern Marianas Islands with Abramoff, who now faces multiple criminal charges involving a series of financial manipulations. Last week a high Bush administration official, David Safavian, the head of procurement for the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), was indicted on charges of lying to federal investigators about his relations with Abramoff.

The indictment of the most powerful Republican in the House comes only a week after ethics charges surfaced against the top Republican in the Senate, Majority Leader Bill Frist, over the sale of stock by his “blind trust.” The multimillionaire former surgeon sold all of his holdings in the Frist family-run HCA Corp., one of the largest US chains of for-profit hospitals, only days before HCA management issued a gloomy forecast of future earnings which caused the stock price to drop more than 20 percent. Frist has denied that he made the lucrative sale on the basis of inside knowledge of the company’s condition, but the Securities and Exchange Commission has opened an investigation into the deal.

The Republican congressional leadership has been seriously weakened in recent months, going back to the debacle of its intervention into the Terri Schiavo case. DeLay and Frist played the most prominent roles in the effort to cater to the Christian fundamentalist hysteria over the severely and irreversibly brain-damaged woman.

Coming on the heels of the Bush administration’s disastrous performance during Hurricane Katrina and the deteriorating conditions in US-occupied Iraq, the charges against DeLay and Frist signal a growing political crisis of the Bush administration.



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