

Behind the DeLay indictment: vicious infighting within the US ruling elite

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The indictment of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, which forced him to step down Wednesday from his post in the congressional leadership, has brought to the surface bitter conflicts within the American ruling elite. While DeLay was indicted for violating a Texas state law prohibiting corporate campaign contributions to state legislative candidates, the broader issues concern the direction of the Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress.

The divisions cut across the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans. More significant than the predictable and superficial gloating by congressional Democrats is the tepid support—and even outright criticism—which DeLay has received from sections of the Republican Party.

While DeLay's support is centered in the Christian fundamentalist groups, spokesmen for the financial interests and the neo-conservatives who have spearheaded the war in Iraq have seized on DeLay's difficulties as an opportunity to advance their political agenda.

The *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, published an editorial Saturday which criticized the Republican majority in the House of Representatives for its abandonment of budget-cutting initiatives in favor of pork-barrel spending to help consolidate the power of the Republican Party. "No one typified this more than Mr. DeLay, who has always been more fiercely partisan than he is conservative," the *Journal* wrote. "Nothing typified that more than Mr. DeLay's comments on September 13, when he declared post-Katrina that there was nothing left in the federal budget to cut. They had already trimmed all the fat."

The newspaper, which reliably translates the thinking of broad sections of the financial oligarchy into political invective, complained that the Republican Congress had accomplished little since the 2003 tax cuts. Funneling another \$700 billion into the pockets of the super-rich was all well and good, the *Journal* seemed to say, but where was the other side of the budget equation—the corresponding cuts in social spending for the poor and the working population?

Several right-wing organs made caustic criticisms of DeLay. The *American Spectator*, a magazine that conducted an obsessive anti-Clinton campaign throughout the 1990s, said that DeLay has "worn out his welcome.... Whether or not he's actually dirty, Republicans should let him hang out to dry."

The *Weekly Standard*, the house organ of the neoconservatives, was equally dismissive, suggesting that DeLay had become a symbol of Republican corruption because of his brazen promotion of business interests and personal ties to corporate lobbyists. (Since Bush took office in 2000, the number of lobbyists in Washington has more than doubled to some 35,000.)

DeLay and his closest supporters, principally on the Christian fundamentalist right, fought back against the effort to bury him politically. The ex-majority leader began a series of media appearances, denouncing the indictment as the partisan action of a Democratic prosecutor in the liberal enclave of Austin, Texas. DeLay said he would remain active in the congressional Republican leadership, despite giving up his position as required by caucus rules, and predicted that the indictment would be dismissed before the end of the year, clearing the way for his return.

One of DeLay's first media appearances was on the "700 Club," the program hosted by Pat Robertson, fundamentalist preacher and multimillionaire proprietor of the Christian Broadcasting Network. Last month Robertson drew public notice for his suggestion that the US government assassinate Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez because of his opposition to US foreign policy and friendly relations with the Castro regime in Cuba. Nonetheless, DeLay had no difficulty appearing on Robertson's program to deplore what he calls "the politics of personal destruction."

On Sunday morning, DeLay submitted to his first lengthy media interview, a half-hour appearance on Fox News Sunday, where he was handled with kid gloves by the Murdoch-owned voice of the ultra-right. DeLay was given free rein to deny the charges against himself and vilify the Texas prosecutor. No political critic was interviewed, nor

was there any attempt to point out the hypocrisy of one of the leading supporters of the Clinton impeachment denouncing an “out-of-control” prosecutor allegedly carrying out a partisan agenda.

The divisions within the Republican camp were already displayed in the first hours after DeLay’s indictment. House Speaker Dennis Hastert reportedly wanted to replace DeLay on an interim basis with Congressman David Dreier, chairman of the House Rules Committee, a conservative from a suburban Southern California district. Dreier is distrusted by the Christian fundamentalists, however, who regard him as shaky on stem cell research, a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, and similar social issues.

Faced with a revolt in the Republican caucus, Hastert reversed himself and named the House majority whip, Roy Blunt, as DeLay’s temporary replacement, with Dreier “assisting” in relations between the Republican leadership and Republican committee chairmen. Blunt is DeLay’s ideological clone, with ratings in 2002 of 0 from the League of Conservation Voters, the public employees’ union AFSCME, and the liberal Americans for Democratic Action, a 100 percent rating from the US Chamber of Commerce and the American Conservative Union, and a 92 rating from the Christian Coalition.

The former president of a Baptist college in southern Missouri, Blunt is a protégé of former Missouri senator and former US attorney general John Ashcroft. He has only nine years in Congress, an unusually brief tenure for a senior leadership position, but in that time he has followed DeLay’s practice of catering equally to corporate lobbyists and Christian fundamentalist groups.

Like DeLay, he has built a political machine that operates both in Washington and in his home state. His oldest son Matt was elected governor of Missouri in 2004. Blunt hired several former DeLay aides, including James W. Ellis, one of two political aides indicted last week along with the Texas congressman.

In 2002, Blunt sought to attach a provision sought by the tobacco industry to the bill creating the Department of Homeland Security. At the time he was dating a lobbyist for Philip Morris, the biggest tobacco company, whom he later married. His son Andrew also works as a lobbyist for the tobacco industry, while the congressman has received \$150,000 in campaign contributions from Philip Morris over the years.

In the Texas legal case itself, DeLay’s attorney Dick DeGuerin announced that the congressman would appear at an arraignment in Austin on October 21, where he would plead not guilty to the conspiracy charge. This arrangement allows DeLay to avoid the spectacle of an arrest or public booking and fingerprinting.

DeLay continued to smear the prosecutor, Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle, claiming that the only reason for the indictment was to force the House Republican caucus to invoke the rule requiring him to step down as majority leader. The caucus repealed the rule nearly a year ago, after the first indictments were brought in the Texas case, but had to restore it after a barrage of unfavorable media commentary.

“It is a political witch-hunt, trying to do political damage,” DeLay claimed. “In my case, he did it in conjunction and working with the Democratic leadership here in Washington, DC.” DeLay offered no evidence of collusion. On the contrary, all indications are that the case against DeLay was spearheaded by local Texas Democrats, particularly candidates defeated in 2002 with the assistance of DeLay’s money-laundering of corporate cash.

Two Texas state judges have issued rulings in favor of the prosecution. In May, a judge ruled that some of the defeated Democratic state legislative candidates were entitled to monetary damages for the campaign finance violations by the Republicans. Another judge rejected the contention of the Republicans that the state law barring corporate contributions was unconstitutional, and refused to dismiss earlier indictments against Ellis and John Colyandro, the two men indicted again along with DeLay.

There were several press reports that Earle’s case against DeLay had been strengthened at the last minute by the decision of at least one Republican Party operative to turn state’s evidence and cooperate with the prosecution. The testimony of Colyandro, Ellis or another DeLay aide, Warren Robold, would be a devastating blow against the former majority leader.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that several corporations involved in the money-laundering scheme may be cooperating with the prosecutor. DeLay personally contacted at least one CEO, the head of the Internet company Questerra Corp., for a \$25,000 check to the political action committee, TRMPAC, which is the focal point of the indictment. The Associated Press reported that a former political director of the Republican National Committee, Terry Nelson, had testified before the Austin grand jury.



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