

Republican Party crisis deepens: DeLay forced out of congressional leadership

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Former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay announced Saturday he was giving up his effort to resume his position, as congressional Republicans maneuvered in the face of the influence-peddling scandal involving Republican insider Jack Abramoff. The longtime lobbyist and Bush fundraiser pled guilty January 3 to charges of fraud, tax evasion and conspiracy to bribe public officials.

Under the plea agreement Abramoff signed with federal prosecutors, limiting his sentence to 9½ to 11 years, he will testify against the congressmen, congressional aides and federal government officials whom he conspired to bribe. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of additional indictments or forced resignations may result. DeLay's final abandonment of his leadership position is only the first consequence.

DeLay stepped down temporarily as House Majority Leader last September, after he was indicted by an Austin, Texas grand jury on charges of money laundering in a scheme to funnel illegal campaign contributions to Republican candidates for the Texas state legislature. Under rules of the House Republican caucus, leaders cannot remain in office after being indicted.

Attorneys for DeLay brought enormous pressure to bear on the Texas judge, Pat Priest, who is hearing the money-laundering case, seeking a dismissal of the charges by the end of January so that DeLay could return to his leadership position when the House of Representatives goes back into session January 31.

The opening date of the legislative session was deliberately pushed back by the Republican leadership, not only to accommodate DeLay himself, but to avoid a fresh leadership contest which might exacerbate inner-party divisions revealed over the past several months over such issues as relief for Hurricane Katrina victims,

budget cuts in social spending and opening the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling.

After Abramoff's guilty plea Tuesday, however, several dozen Republican House members announced their support for a leadership vote and efforts began to collect the 50 signatures needed to force it. DeLay and his two closest allies, Speaker Dennis Hastert and interim majority leader Roy Blunt, bowed to the inevitable. DeLay sent a letter to Hastert Saturday supporting the election of a new majority leader and announcing he was stepping aside permanently.

Blunt said he would run for majority leader, but Representative John A. Boehner of Ohio, a former member of the House leadership under Newt Gingrich and now the chairman of the education committee, said he would challenge him. If Blunt is victorious, he would give up his current post of majority whip, the No. 3 position, opening up a contest for that job. Chief deputy whip Eric Cantor is seeking that position, but could face several opponents.

All of the congressmen mentioned in the press as potential leadership candidates are diehard reactionaries—fervent supporters of the war in Iraq, Bush's tax cuts for the wealthy, the USA Patriot Act, and the stillborn effort to privatize Social Security. They nonetheless are divided into hostile factions: adherents of the former Gingrich-Dick Armey leadership vs. supporters of DeLay and Hastert; congressmen from the Midwest and West vs. the Southern clique which has dominated Congress for a decade; and those who advocate a renewed emphasis on budget-cutting and austerity vs. those for whom doling out federal cash to favored business interests takes precedence.

What underlies these divisions—aside from the not-unimportant fear of indictment, loss of position, even

imprisonment—is the growing concern that the political tide is shifting against their ultra-right agenda. This is not reflected in some groundswell of support for the Democratic Party, which advocates an only slightly watered-down version of the same agenda, but in mounting signs of popular opposition to the program of the ruling elite as a whole, from the war in Iraq to the neglect of vital social needs (Hurricane Katrina) to the onslaught against the living standards, pensions and jobs of workers.

This sense of impending political danger is voiced by such traditional mouthpieces of the extreme right as the *Wall Street Journal*, which bemoaned the failures of the congressional Republicans in an editorial Monday. Dismissing as yesterday's news the \$2 trillion in tax cuts plundered from the Treasury for the super-rich, the *Journal* declared, "Beyond welfare reform and tax cuts (and perhaps health-savings accounts), the GOP has achieved little in the last decade that will outlast the next Democratic majority."

The newspaper added this warning, "Our sense is that Republicans don't yet appreciate the trouble they're in. Confident of K Street money and gerrymandered districts, they think the voters will never turn Congress over to a party run by Nancy Pelosi. But that's also what Democrats and the media thought about Republicans led by Newt Gingrich in 1994."

The *Journal* has aimed its fire against DeLay along these lines for nearly a year, and it has been joined by other such representatives of the ultra-right as *National Review* magazine and the former leaders of the House Republicans, Gingrich and Armey. Gingrich, in particular, has sought to revive his political career as an advocate of "reform," by which he means disposing of those Republican congressional leaders who forced him out in 1998, and turning even further to the right.

DeLay has been the principal leader of the House Republicans since Gingrich's ouster. He engineered the election of Hastert, his deputy, as House speaker, while settling for the number two position, majority leader, which left him in real day-to-day control of the House. He also selected both Blunt, the majority whip who became his stand-in, and Cantor, the deputy whip.

Along with Ohio Republican Robert Ney, chairman of the administration committee, DeLay was the House leader with the closest ties to Abramoff. He went on trips to Scotland and the Marianas Islands with the

lobbyist, and a steady stream of former DeLay aides went on to make millions in the influence-peddling racket, many of them as partners of Abramoff.

DeLay's wife Christine also cashed in, with a make-work job at Alexander Strategy, an Abramoff-linked firm headed by former DeLay chief of staff Edwin Buckham. Mrs. DeLay's sole task was to contact the 435 members of the House of Representatives and ask the name of their favorite charity, for which she collected \$115,000. Former DeLay press spokesman Michael Scanlon pled guilty November 21 to conspiracy to bribe public officials and agreed to testify against Abramoff and unnamed congressmen.

These connections were not an aberration, but rather essential to DeLay's rise in the Republican caucus. The former operator of a pesticide distribution business in the Houston suburbs, DeLay's political motivation seems to have been centered on hatred of environmental and other business regulations. He was first elected to Congress in 1985 and was considered a backbencher during his first decade.

His ascent in the hierarchy came after the Republican takeover of Congress in the 1994 elections, and it was fueled by a huge influx of corporate money into the Republican Party. DeLay won election in early 1995 as the majority whip, defeating Robert Walker of Pennsylvania, a better-known congressman who was much closer to Gingrich, just elected as speaker. DeLay had supplied so much money to newly elected Republicans, thanks to fundraising through his political action fund ARMPAC and other sources, that he obtained 52 of 73 votes from the freshmen class, and handily defeated Walker.

ARMPAC may well turn out to supply the link between the Texas money-laundering indictment and DeLay's Washington operations, since it seems that money from Abramoff interests may have passed through ARMPAC to Texas candidates. The Austin prosecutor, Ronnie Earle, has now sought material from the federal prosecutors to bolster his state case against DeLay.



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