

The resignation of Tom DeLay and the crisis of the US two-party system

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The resignation of former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, once the most powerful leader of the congressional Republicans, is not only a political setback for the Bush administration; it further discredits the entire corporate-controlled two-party political system in the United States.

DeLay ended his congressional career with a final message that epitomized the bullying, hypocrisy and appeals to reactionary prejudice that were his political stock in trade. His announcement was distributed on videotape, rather than delivered live at a press conference, so that he could avoid any questioning by the media.

The statement was rife with McCarthyite language, denouncing his Democratic Party opponents in apocalyptic language, as though they were left-wing radicals rather than right-wing bourgeois politicians only slightly less reactionary than DeLay himself. He appealed for an all-out Republican mobilization in the November congressional elections, warning, "A Democrat Congress in 2007 would, without doubt or remorse, raise hundreds of billions of dollars in taxes, summarily cut and run from the war on terror and immediately initiate an unconstitutional impeachment of President Bush."

This last charge is particularly rich, given that DeLay was the prime mover in the unconstitutional and antidemocratic conspiracy that produced the Clinton impeachment.

Likewise filled with unintentional irony was his post-resignation interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC News, in which he complained, "It shows you that the politics of personal destruction and character assassination takes its toll." It is hard to top this for self-pity and cynicism, especially from a political thug so ruthless in his treatment of opponents that he was given—and gloried in—the nickname "The Hammer."

As DeLay's hometown *Houston Chronicle* noted in an editorial on his resignation, "The congressman frequently deplored what he calls the 'politics of personal destruction,' yet he could be brutal toward others. He once compared the Environmental Protection Agency to the Nazi Gestapo secret police and preached that federal judges who did not rule his way should be impeached and punished."

DeLay has also portrayed himself as a religious martyr, telling an assembly of fundamentalist preachers last week that he was the target of dark forces engaged in a "war against Christians."

DeLay's resignation came just three days after his former deputy chief of staff, Tony Rudy, pleaded guilty to charges of receiving illegal gifts and favors from Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff,

the convicted con-man and influence peddler who defrauded Indian tribes of tens of millions of dollars. DeLay was a top recipient of Abramoff's largesse, traveling with him on several expensive overseas junkets and telling at least one audience that the lobbyist and longtime Republican Party activist was "one of my closest personal friends."

Rudy follows Michael Scanlon, DeLay's former press secretary, who pleaded guilty to similar charges last November. Unlike Scanlon, however, Rudy admitted to illegal actions during the time he was on DeLay's staff, some of them directly related to the congressman's support for legislative action.

Neither Rudy nor Scanlon has yet implicated DeLay in a specific criminal act, but Rudy's confession, made public Friday, includes the declaration that the document "does not include all of the facts known to me concerning criminal activity in which I or others engaged," suggesting that the other shoe is still to drop.

The next target in the federal influence-peddling investigation is believed to be former DeLay chief of staff Edwin Buckham, regularly described in the press as DeLay's "closest political and spiritual adviser." Buckham is referred to in the Rudy indictment as "Lobbyist B" (Abramoff is A), while DeLay is "Representative #2" (Republican Congressman Robert Ney of Ohio, another Abramoff crony, is "Representative #1"). Ney could face indictment this month, once a waiver he signed last year expires, giving prosecutors until April 30 to bring charges.

The Buckham connection was particularly damaging for DeLay personally because Buckham's lobbying firm had been making payments of nearly \$4,000 a month to the congressman's wife, Christine DeLay, over a three-year period, for what has all the earmarks of a make-work contract. (Her sole task, according to press reports, was to identify the favorite charity of each member of the House of Representatives).

In February, the FBI issued a grand jury subpoena for records of US Family Network, a nonprofit front group formed by Buckham. The subpoena specifically seeks documents related to Tom DeLay, Christine DeLay, Rudy, and a number of Abramoff clients.

Pressure on a spouse is a standard tactic by prosecutors in a corruption probe who are seeking to obtain cooperative behavior from a suspect. Rudy's guilty plea came in return for an agreement that his wife Lisa would not be indicted, provided she testified truthfully about her own role in influence-peddling. Something similar could be forthcoming with Mrs. DeLay as well.

The June date for DeLay's resignation to take effect has some

significance, since that is when he is scheduled to go on trial on charges of money-laundering brought by a county prosecutor in Texas. The prosecutor alleges that DeLay violated a state law which forbids corporate contributions to political candidates. By stepping down and withdrawing from his reelection campaign, DeLay can legally shift his massive campaign war chest, an estimated \$1.2 million, into his legal defense fund.

There is little reason to credit DeLay's claim that his resignation has nothing to do with his legal problems. He maintains that he is stepping aside out of party loyalty, to make way for a more viable Republican candidate and prevent his Democratic opponent from conducting the fall campaign as a "referendum on Tom DeLay."

The disgraced congressman could have withdrawn as a candidate without resigning from Congress. Instead, he fought a ferocious battle in the Republican primary against several opponents, spending more than \$1 million, but winning only 62 percent of the vote, a poor showing for an 11-term incumbent. Until the Rudy indictment and an exposé last week in the *Washington Post* of Buckham's profiteering from an Abramoff-linked charity, DeLay appeared determined to cling to his seat.

The DeLay resignation was followed by an outpouring of empty moralizing from top Democrats and Republicans, as well as the media, and suggestions that his departure marked the end of an era, bringing a halt to the period when well-heeled corporate lobbyists obtained seats at the legislative table in return for lavish gifts and campaign contributions. In many instances, lobbyists literally wrote the legislation that was then introduced by their congressional front-men.

While DeLay and his notorious "K Street project," named after the Washington DC street where many of the major lobbyists have their offices, were the most flagrant expression of government-for-sale, the process continues and dominates official Washington. The Democratic Party is just as deeply implicated in what leading Democrats now call the "culture of corruption," despite their effort to restrict the label solely to the Republicans.

Corporate money has always called the shots in Washington, but the past quarter-century has seen a qualitative intensification of this process and the rise to power of a political underworld—thuggish operatives who employ vast sums of money and unscrupulous conspiratorial methods, bolstered by a servile and compliant media, to do the bidding of the super-rich.

The social roots of this phenomenon can be discerned by asking the elementary political question: who benefits? The past 25 years have seen a massive transfer of wealth from the vast majority of the American people—those who must work for a living—into the pockets of an already moneyed elite. The figures are by now well-established: in 1979, the top one percent owned about 20 percent of the national wealth; by 2004, that figure had more than doubled. The real incomes of most Americans have stagnated, while the incomes of corporate CEOs and the ruling elite have rocketed upwards.

This process has continued under Republican and Democratic presidents and Republican and Democratic Congresses, in recession and economic upswing, in war and peace. It is the fundamental socio-economic fact of modern America, although it is generally disregarded or mystified in the commentaries of the

corporate-controlled media.

A particularly blatant example of the latter is the attitude of the *Wall Street Journal*, which, in an April 4 editorial on DeLay and Abramoff, declared in seeming bewilderment, "What caused this outbreak of greed is impossible to know for sure." The next day the same editorial page outlined how the Republican Party could recover from the scandal; among its suggestions were extending Bush's income tax cuts for the wealthy and permanently abolishing the tax on inherited wealth.

Corruption is not an accidental or external aspect of this process, but rather lies at its very heart. The entire society, including its political institutions, is poisoned by the relentless drive to accumulate ever-greater private wealth in the hands of a narrow, privileged stratum.

Billionaires, of course, do not generally stoop to engage in congressional committee staff-work or legislative vote-counting. For this they employ political operatives, largely drawn from the more unscrupulous and backward sections of the middle class. (DeLay was the proprietor of a small pesticide distribution business before launching his political career.)

It is not surprising that those who choose to make their political career by assisting the wealthiest in society to grow even wealthier do not represent the highest type of human material. The occupation of providing ideological justifications for personal enrichment necessarily encourages the basest desires for profiteering and self-dealing at public expense. DeLay, Abramoff & Co. are not an aberration, but the logical outcome of the increasingly reckless and criminal plundering of the United States by the corporate elite and its two political parties.



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