

Alaska Senator convicted on seven corruption charges

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Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, the longest-serving Republican in the history of the US Senate, was convicted Monday on seven felony counts of filing false reports to conceal more than a quarter million dollars worth of gifts from political and business cronies. A Washington DC jury reached its verdict after deliberating only a few hours, evidently rejecting out of hand the defense case.

The conviction is a blow to the congressional Republican Party leadership, in which Stevens played a major role. When the Republicans controlled the Senate he was chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. During those years he also held the position of president pro-tem of the Senate, a largely honorific post but one that placed him third in line of succession to the presidency, after the vice president and the speaker of the House of Representatives.

Stevens himself faces a re-election vote next Tuesday, and is now expected to lose heavily to his Democratic opponent, Mark Begich, the mayor of Anchorage, Alaska's largest city. He has been trailing in the polls since he was indicted during the summer.

While Stevens continues to declare his innocence and his lawyers plan to appeal, no leading Republicans have rallied to his support. Republican presidential candidate John McCain called on Stevens to resign from the Senate, while McCain's running mate Sarah Palin, the governor of Alaska and a one-time Stevens protégé, urged the senator to "do the right thing," without saying what that was.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell—who faces a difficult reelection of his own November 4—issued a statement acknowledging the jury verdict. Senator John Ensign of Nevada, chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, admitted

that Stevens was likely to lose his seat in next week's balloting, saying, "Ted Stevens served his constituents for over 40 years, and I am disappointed to see his career end in disgrace."

Stevens was prosecuted for filing false reports, rather than for accepting bribes, because there was no indication that the lavish gifts had been intended to influence specific policy actions. It had more the character of a reward for services rendered than an incentive for new legislative favors. The senator was a longtime supporter of VECO, the oil services supply company that provided the bulk of the gifts. The CEO of the company, Bill Allen, was a close associate—and star witness at the trial.

Judge Emmett Sullivan set sentencing for February 25, 2009. The 84-year-old senator could receive five years in prison for each of the seven counts, but press reports suggested he was unlikely to get more than a fine and could have his sentence commuted or even receive an outright pardon from President Bush before Bush leaves office January 20, 2009.

The details of Stevens's dealings with VECO were the focus of most of the trial's proceedings. As attested by Allen and several VECO workmen, the company supplied more than half the labor and materials used in upgrading Stevens' home in Girdwood, Alaska from a simple A-frame to a two-story home with outdoor decks on each floor, a modernized electrical system and a wide range of amenities. While Stevens paid subcontractors about \$160,000 for work done, the actual value of the work is estimated at over \$350,000, with the balance supplied free by VECO.

Stevens was charged with concealing the VECO donation as well as several other expensive gifts, including a \$29,000 bronze statue, a \$3,200 stained-glass window, a \$6,000 generator and a \$2,700

Brookstone massaging chair. The lesser gifts combined would cost more than the salary of the average American worker—a fact that no doubt had an impact on the largely working class jury.

The jurors declined requests for press interviews, but trial observers reported that three pieces of evidence seemed to have the greatest impact on them:

* A note from Stevens to Allen dated October 6, 2002, in which the senator expresses his "thanks for all the work on the chalet" and then requests a bill, warning, "Remember Torricelli my friend," a reference to the Democratic senator who was forced to abandon his re-election campaign after evidence of influence-peddling surfaced. This refuted Stevens' claim that he did not know that VECO was performing work on his home, and showed his awareness of the potential for a violation of ethics rules.

* The recording of a telephone conversation between Allen and Stevens, made after Allen had become a cooperating witness for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), in which Stevens suggested that the worst consequences they could suffer if their relationship became public was a fine and a little jail time.

* The cross-examination of Stevens, after he testified in his own defense and denied the charges, in the course of which he told prosecutor Brenda Morris—after a series of questions about the gifts he had received, and which he claimed were loans rather than gifts—"We have lots of things in our house that don't belong to us, ma'am."

Also damaging, and somewhat ludicrous, was the testimony of Catherine Stevens, the senator's wife, who paid the bills to the subcontractor for the home renovation. She claimed that she had simply forgotten about not receiving a bill for the enormous expansion of the renovation, including two outer decks. "So you came home one day and a deck was there," Morris asked. "Yes," she replied.

In retrospect, Stevens lost the case when he failed, in August, to obtain a change of venue from Washington DC, where the false reports were filed, to Alaska. The jury was largely black and working class, comprised of eight women and four men, including a third grade teacher, a hospital operations clerk, a receptionist, a gift shop employee, a bookkeeper, a government statistician and a drug rehabilitation counselor, who was selected

by his fellow jurors as the foreman.



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