

Former governor of Virginia found guilty on corruption charges

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Former Republican governor of Virginia Robert F. McDonnell and his wife Maureen were found guilty September 4 of 20 felony counts of corruption, conspiracy and fraud. A federal court jury found they used the governor's office to obtain payoffs from a multimillionaire business crony.

McDonnell is the first Virginia governor convicted of corruption charges related to his time in office. The former governor and his wife face sentencing next January, and potentially lengthy jail terms.

From April 2011 to March 2013, McDonnell and his wife took more than \$177,000 in payments from businessman Jonnie R. Williams, Jr., in exchange for the promotion of products made by Williams' pharmaceutical firm, Star Scientific.

In addition to direct loans made to assist the McDonnells, Williams also bought a number of gifts for the McDonnell family, including paying for vacations, golf trips, clothing and jewelry, as well as wedding and engagement expenses for the governors' daughters, Caitlin and Jeannine.

There was little dispute about these facts. The payments were documented and admitted by the defense, while the McDonnells had been extremely vocal in promoting the pharmaceutical firm's business. The defense argued that there was no corrupt exchange of favors for cash and gifts, and that the McDonnells had simply been boosting a Virginia-based company as a normal part of their role as Governor and First Lady.

During the trial, the former governor's lawyers sought to rebut the conspiracy charges by portraying the McDonnells' marriage as so troubled that the two defendants could not have collaborated in such a scheme. The gifts given to Maureen McDonnell were portrayed as romantic advances by Williams, for whom the First Lady was said to have had "a mild obsession."

In addition to this, the defense disputed whether giving political favors to Williams had constituted an "official act" as governor.

In the end, these diversionary arguments failed to convince the jurors, who unanimously found the former governor guilty of 11 out of 13 felony counts and his wife of nine out of 13.

Prior to his indictment, McDonnell, Virginia governor from 2009 to 2013, was widely regarded within the Republican Party as a star on the rise. From 2011 to 2013 he served as chairman of the Republican Governors Association, succeeding Texas Governor Rick Perry in that position. He was considered as a potential choice for the Republican Party's vice-presidential nomination 2012, and he delivered the party's official rebuttal to President Obama's State of the Union Address in 2010.

As governor of Virginia, McDonnell pursued a policy of fiscal austerity coupled with social attacks meant to garner support with the religious right. In 2010, the governor slashed over \$646 million from state public education funds, while enacting a broader program of austerity.

The conviction of the McDonnells was portrayed as a tragedy and an embarrassment both by the corporate-controlled media and big business politicians of both the Republican and Democratic parties. McDonnell's successor, Democrat Terry McAuliffe, said, "I am deeply saddened by the events of the trial that ended in today's verdict, and the impact it has had on our Commonwealth's reputation for honesty and clean government."

Cutting through this official piety, Jeff Shapiro of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* wrote, "One wonders, given Virginia's long tradition of a business-friendly government, if perhaps some of these things took place

and no one really noticed,” adding “[t]his has been the pattern in the commonwealth for a long, long time.”

In truth, there is little difference between the crass money-grubbing by the governor and his wife and what is everyday practice in American capitalist politics.



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