

Former Republican speaker indicted on felony charges

A reporter
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Former House Speaker Dennis Hastert, whose eight years in that office were the most by any Republican in history, was indicted Thursday on two federal felony charges related to alleged payments of hush money to a former student.

Hastert immediately resigned his high-paying job as a Washington lobbyist and his position on the board of governors of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, while refusing to respond to inquiries from the press.

The indictment was handed down in the federal court for the Northern District of Illinois, which includes the far western suburban area that Hastert represented in Congress for 22 years, following 20 years as a public school teacher and high school wrestling coach.

Hastert was charged with deliberately structuring cash withdrawals from bank accounts “in amounts under \$10,000 in separate transactions on at least 106 occasions,” for the purpose of evading federal reporting requirements, and then with lying to FBI agents after the agency began an investigation of the cash transactions, which totaled \$3.5 million, in 2013.

According to federal investigators who spoke with the press, Hastert was contacted in 2010 by a person who had known him most of his or her life, claiming the former congressman, now a multi-millionaire Washington lobbyist, was guilty of “past misconduct.”

Neither the indictment nor the initial statement from federal investigators disclosed the name, sex or age of the person receiving Hastert’s payoffs, identified only as “Individual A.” On Friday afternoon, however, unnamed investigators told the media that Individual A was a male student of Hastert’s who had sexual relations with him in high school, more than 30 years ago.

Hastert began making cash payments, initially withdrawing \$50,000 at a time from his accounts, but

when his bank objected, citing the requirement that cash withdrawals of \$10,000 or more be reported, Hastert switched to withdrawals below that figure. Doing so to avoid reporting the cash is itself a felony under federal law.

There has been no suggestion of any link between Hastert’s “past misconduct” and his public political career. Quite the contrary: his rise within the Republican ranks in the House of Representatives was owed largely to his reputation as a colorless and unpretentious individual with a model suburban family and no suggestion of scandal.

Hastert was a House deputy whip, the fourth-ranking figure in the Republican leadership, virtually unknown outside his own district, when he was vaulted into the speakership by the political crisis within the Republican Party provoked by the effort to impeach and remove Democratic President Bill Clinton in 1998.

When the Republicans unexpectedly lost seats in the 1998 congressional elections, because of a public backlash against the impeachment drive, House Speaker Newt Gingrich stepped down as the Republican leader. Congressman Robert Livingston of Louisiana, the initial favorite to succeed him, withdrew his candidacy because of reports he had an extramarital affair, which cut across the attempt to remove Clinton for lying about his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

Majority Whip Tom DeLay, the real power in the Republican caucus, hand-picked Hastert, his own deputy, to fill the top spot and serve, in effect, as a more acceptable front man for DeLay’s hard-line Christian fundamentalist politics. Hastert’s main task was to use a conciliatory personal style to maintain a united front in the Republican caucus, which held only a narrow majority.

Throughout this period of eight years, Hastert was the

second-ranking official in the line of succession to the American presidency, after Vice President Al Gore (1998-2001) and Vice President Richard Cheney (2001-2007).

Whatever the truth of the reports about Hastert's conduct as a high school teacher and coach, his career in Congress was typical of the corruption of American capitalist politics. He entered Congress with a net worth of \$270,000 and left 22 years later with a net worth between \$4 million and \$17 million, most of it in real estate holdings. He then began to make bigger money as a lobbyist at Dickstein Shapiro, where he represented, among others, Peabody Energy, Lorillard Tobacco and the government of Turkey.



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