

November 13, 2005

The politics of ethics  
THE MORALIST

ANITA L. ALLEN

Charge a Washington politician with ethical misconduct, and you may get accused of partisanship. That's because the inside-the-Beltway crowd doesn't like accepting blame. No wonder President Bush had to order mandatory ethics briefings for White House staffers starting last week.

The briefings follow last month's criminal indictment of former vice presidential aide I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, who stands accused of lying about his role in revealing the identity of a CIA agent. But Bush didn't need such an excuse; the ethical transgressions by national officeholders in recent years make the charges against Libby seem almost quaint.

In fact, it's time to declare the "It's politics; they're out to get me" response to misconduct charges completely out of order. And the case of former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) - who has called his recent indictment on money-laundering charges an act of "political retribution" by Democratic enemies - shows why.

DeLay was indicted last month. He could be innocent. But in September 2002, \$190,000 in corporate contributions went to the Republican National Committee through DeLay's political action committee, and the following month exactly \$190,000 came back from the Republican National Committee, earmarked for 17 Republican candidates.

Those candidates were running for the Texas statehouse; their victory would enable Republicans to redraw the state political map to create more majority Republican districts and send more Republicans to Washington. The plan worked. All 17 candidates were elected, redistricting occurred and five new Republicans went to Congress.

Ronnie Earle, the district attorney in Travis County, Texas, oversaw the grand jury that indicted DeLay. Earle believes DeLay and his PAC knowingly accepted corporate money intended for state politicians - a crime in Texas - and deliberately used the Republican National Committee to clean up dirty money for Texas office-seekers.

DeLay should not be shocked that the public could believe him capable of misconduct. Just look at his record: He has accumulated at least four public admonishments from the bipartisan House ethics committee.

The committee admonished him for offering to endorse the political campaign of a fellow congressman's son in return for a favorable vote on a Medicaid prescription drug bill; for appearing to repay Westar Energy for a \$25,000 contribution with a two-day executive golf trip and political access; for attempting to use the Federal Aviation Administration's resources to track down information on political opponents' whereabouts; and for threatening the Industries Alliance for not hiring a Republican as its president.

Other ethics allegations have tainted DeLay's reputation. For example, he has been accused of accepting travel to the Far East that was partially subsidized by lobbyists. Moreover, vigorous efforts on behalf of the Republican Party to protect DeLay have tended to add density to the ethics cloud over his head.

His party changed the Republican membership of the House ethics committee so that it would include members friendlier to DeLay. In anticipation of troubles for their

colleague, House Republicans battled Democrats earlier this year over rule changes that would have made it more difficult to bring ethics charges. More telling, Republicans changed and then restored a rule requiring an indicted House majority leader to step down.

It's theoretically possible that a squeaky-clean politician could be the target of an unfair ethics probe solely as a matter of partisan politics. But politicians like DeLay who are far from perfect can't credibly cry "politics" when their ethics are under scrutiny once again. If they do, they shouldn't be surprised when we just roll our eyes.

END OF DOCUMENT