

Tom DeLay's legacy

'The Hammer' is off the hook and blames Democrats and activist judges for his travail.

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Although a Texas appeals court has reversed the 2010 verdict that found former House Majority Leader [Tom DeLay](#) guilty of money laundering, it's not so easy to reverse the carcinogenic effect the once-formidable House majority leader had on the body politic. During his two-decade reign in Washington, "the Hammer" nurtured a pervasive cynicism that continues to hobble the democratic process. He perfected a system of gerrymandering that has helped freeze governance into a sclerotic contortion, and as a cash-wielding power broker he was a master at making money the measure of all things political.

The Icarus-like lawmaker eventually got his wings singed when he was found guilty of violating a 1903 Texas law that bans corporate contributions to state political campaigns. At issue was some \$190,000 in corporate contributions to DeLay's political action committee that prosecutors claimed were illegally passed along to Republican state candidates in 2002. That money helped the GOP gain control of the Legislature for the first time since Reconstruction.

Although his conviction carried a three-year prison term, the [Texas Republican](#) never went to jail and has been fighting the conviction since it was handed down. On Thursday, his prayers were answered, literally. In the midst of prayer with a group in Washington, he got word that the [Third Court of Appeals](#) had ruled that his actions did not violate any state laws.

"DeLay did not dispute any of the transfer-of-funds transactions or that the Election Code prohibited corporations from making campaign contributions to Texas candidates," the opinion overturning the conviction noted. "DeLay's defensive theory, among others, was that none of the transfers was illegal - that they were structured to comply with the campaign finance laws - and, therefore, there were no proceeds of criminal activity to support money laundering or the conspiracy to commit money laundering."

The former Sugar Land exterminator, who spent nearly \$12 million defending himself, was quick to blame vengeful [Democrats](#), notably then-Travis County District Attorney [Ronnie Earle](#), and activist judges for his legal travail. Although he viewed the appeals court ruling both as vindication and as an opportunity to restart his career, he's not totally in the clear. The Travis County district attorney's office is likely to appeal.

Justice may or may not have been served by Thursday's court ruling, but ironically, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the 2010 Citizens United case has swept away most restrictions on corporate contributions. Neither that ruling nor this week's appeals court decision can sweep away the lingering mess that is DeLay's political legacy.