



Capitol Fax

POLITICAL INTELLIGENCE *by Rich Miller*

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THE PLOT THICKENS

IT GETS WORSE I've spent the past couple of days talking to several former members of the House Republican staff to see if I could find out what the heck is going on over there.

Their answers were almost uniform, and the picture they all painted was ugly. If they are to be believed, and I believe them, then somebody needs to go to jail. Attorney General Jim Ryan has asked for the documents that *Crain's Chicago Business* used in its weekend expose' and is promising to investigate. Let's hope this is not another whitewash.

I've hidden the identities of my six sources as much as possible. All of them fear retaliation, even though they no longer work for Daniels and two don't even work in government any longer. According to most of them, fear of retribution kept them quiet while they were on staff. "They put the fear of God in you if you said anything," said one former HGOP staffer, adding, "They'd run you out of the Republican Party."

Another likened the experience to being in the Mafia. "It's a bad place," said another source. "The position that they put the kids in is brutal. I used to be an idealist."

One source knowingly pointed to a comment that House GOP Leader Lee Daniels' spokesman Gregg Durham made to the *Daily Southtown* in its Monday follow-up to the *Crain's* article that set off this whole explosion. "(I)f someone was cheating on a travel voucher, then they're going to have some answering to do," Durham said.

That's just the sort of message the former staff members expected. "We were always told that if things got rough, and accusations start to fly, they'd blame it on the staff," said one source. Durham, by the way, said his remark was misunderstood. He was referring, he said, to any evidence of wrongdoing committed by anyone, regardless of how high up that went.

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- * The Chicago Office - A November, 2001, memo from one of Daniels' top political people pretty much sums up the problems at the House Republican Leader's Chicago office - an operation that is completely paid for with state funds.

The memo, a copy of which was obtained by *Capitol Fax*, was sent to then-state party chairman Rich Williamson and referred to an attempt to fill a GOP State Central Committeeman vacancy in the 5th District. Williamson is advised in the memo to call the top staffer with any questions at 312-814-2053. That number is Daniels' Chicago office.

"The point of the (Chicago) office was to run political campaigns," said one source. "They'd have political meetings there. They used the state computers to print out (precinct) walk sheets."

Another former staffer said election programs were installed on the office's computers.

All of the staff members who worked in Chicago verified the *Crain's* report that staff were regularly sent out to work on campaigns while still on the state payroll, and received state reimbursement for their travel expenses.

"They said, 'Here's the campaign you're gonna be working on,' and they send you out and they pay you the way they want to." said one source.

"Then," the source continued, "it's left up to you to figure out, 'Wait a minute, this ain't right.'" The source said he was paid out of state funds for campaign work until he raised a "stink" about the situation. "I was getting paid purely state money to do a lot of campaign work," the source said.

Another source claimed he was "under orders to run a campaign on state time." His duties began before May of 2000, the point where the *Crain's* examination began. You may recall that one excuse given by Daniels' spokesman to *Crain's* was that campaigns really don't begin until after Labor Day. In this instance, the campaign work started far earlier.

Often, state-paid and reimbursed staff members were sent into districts with incumbents. But those duties, according to several sources, were mostly political. "District work was things like 'Call senior citizens and tell them why (a certain legislator) is a good candidate for the district,'" a source claimed.

Every former staff member contacted this week understood that what they were doing was against the law. I asked one if that bothered him. "It was my job," he said. "I wanted to run campaigns. I just thought that's the way it was. It's the state of Illinois. It's Chicago."

* **Comp Time** - The defense we have heard about why the House Republican gross payroll didn't fall in the last two months of the '00 election like everyone else's is because staff was being reimbursed for their "comp time" - compensatory time off given for overtime work in lieu of money. The Daniels people openly admit that many staff members are paid a mixture of comp time and campaign cash during the last two months of campaign cycles.

Yet all but one of the former staffers (and he left several years ago) said the whole issue of comp time is a fraud, particularly for people in Daniels' downtown Chicago state office.

"I was on staff just two weeks and they gave me ten days comp time," claimed one former staffer. The source said he worked no overtime in those two weeks that could have accounted for the time off.

Every source who worked in the Chicago office said, as far as they could tell, what little overtime they put in was never even tracked by the Daniels operation. The chief of staff would simply send them a memo at the beginning of the fiscal year telling them how much comp time they had.

"Comp time would just appear and you'd use it," said another source. "We never had to apply for comp time," he said, adding that after the staff was told about how much comp time they had coming to them they'd "fill out the forms," and the deal was done.

"They'd say, 'We need you to do campaign work for seven days, so we'll give you the comp days to pay for it,'" explained a different source.

"There's no overtime at that office," said one source, referring to the state office in Chicago. "The people in Chicago had a problem justifying (their comp time)," attested another source, who worked in Springfield. "I'm not sure how they justified it."

And the comp time was not to be used for anything but campaigns. "This was not vacation time, this was for campaign time," explained one source.

This appears to be a change from the way the operation functioned several years ago, according to an old-timer who is no longer in Springfield. Back then, staff used up vacation time during the political season and were given comp days after the campaign ended.

The House Democrats and the Senate Republicans both claim they do not allow staff to use comp time for campaign work.

* Vouchers - "I was in a situation where (Daniels' campaign committee) screwed me out of money, so they told me to file vouchers," claims one former staff member.

The staffer had run up several bills that the campaign refused to pay. But the staffer needed cash because of low wages, so he was advised to "just say you were gone a little bit longer," on some travel and let the state pick up the tab through voucher reimbursements.

"Because they paid you so (poorly), you needed that travel money," said another source, who said they were paid for campaign travel to an incumbent's district nearest the campaign they were assigned to - which is basically what *Crain's* reported on Sunday.

That same source, by the way, revealed why the House Republicans ostensibly sent staff to Rockford to work on McHenry County campaigns. "No one used (former McHenry County GOP Rep.) Cal Skinner because he would freak out."

"I was asked repeatedly to voucher," claimed another source, who said he "put up a fight about it" on a "regular basis."

"Their counter was, 'Calm down, don't worry about it, this is the way things are done, but there's no way you're going to get paid (from the campaign account),' " the source said, adding, "This was pretty painful to see, the sloppiness, the unethical behavior."

Another former staff member said he also didn't voucher and was under no pressure, but claimed his superiors "would sign anything" staff submitted. "It was the culture," he explained, adding, "I'm not a Boy Scout, but it's ridiculous." The source said he thought vouchering for campaign travel was "stupid" and said he "knew it was illegal."

The old-timer staff member I contacted to compare notes with said he always was careful to mix in a little state business with any campaign trip. So, if he went out to the sticks to recruit a candidate, for instance, he'd always stop in at a legislative office on the way back just to make it legal.

But that doesn't seem to be the case any longer, since *Crain's* reported that the legislators who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of staff support during the spring and summer of 2000 rarely, if ever, saw any of those people. Staff apparently almost never checked in and simply went straight to campaign offices in neighboring districts.