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Dreier gets a share of GOP power

Is Dreier too much of a team player to be GOP leader?

By Lisa Friedman, Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - When California lawmaker David Dreier's name emerged last month as a temporary successor to freshly indicted Majority Leader Tom DeLay, murmuring began among a faction of conservatives who said Dreier was too moderate for the job.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert ultimately gave the slot to Missouri Rep. Roy Blunt, while giving Dreier, R-Glendora, many of the leadership responsibilities.

Whether right-wing members derailed Dreier's ascension is questionable.

The 13-term lawmaker still has moved into the highest echelons of Republican power. He meets regularly with Hastert on strategy. He presides over weekly meetings of committee chairmen. He has, essentially, half of DeLay's old job, just without the title or the office suite.

Many now say that Dreier could emerge more influential than ever. Although - in a town where perception often becomes reality - analysts say the eastern Los Angeles County lawmaker is now battling a public impression that the popular clique didn't want him on its starting team.

"It was a pretty open rebuff of him," said Norman Ornstein, congressional scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

"I don't think his peers are going to elect him to anything higher, but he can chair any committee he wants," added Shawn Steel, past president of the California Republican Party. "I think they're looking for more engaged leadership to fulfill the mission. Being a me-too, get-along Republican isn't going to cut it."

Dreier, for his part, dismisses the ideological labels foisted on him. In his first lengthy discussion about the roller-coaster afternoon that DeLay stepped down, Dreier last week said he was flattered to be considered - but never wanted DeLay's job and still doesn't.

"I've never run for any elected leadership. I've never really aspired to it. For me, the absolute dream job is to be chairman of the Rules Committee," he said in his private top-floor office in the U.S. Capitol.

"On that day, I did a lot of thinking about my father," a Marine Corps drill instructor, Dreier recalled. "My father instilled in me a sense of team. I know that may sound trite, a little mundane."

But, he maintained, it's how he felt about taking on DeLay's role: "I didn't want to do it, but I was willing to do anything for the team."

He attributes not getting the job solely to the sentiment that it was more appropriate to move Blunt - then in the No. 3 job as majority whip - into DeLay's No. 2 role.

"Roy Blunt is next in line," Dreier said. Of Hastert's decision, he said, "In many ways, I was relieved."

But many lawmakers said Dreier was first chosen precisely because he never aimed for GOP leadership and would not have designs on the job if DeLay returned to reclaim his title.

Blunt, however, made a strong play for it. And in the wings, the conservative cadre known as the Republican Study Committee was holding a meeting of its own.

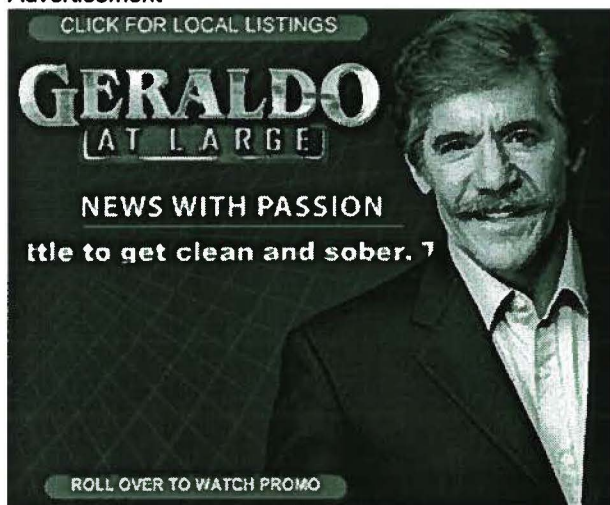
"It probably has to do with the label on David Dreier, and he's not labeled as a clear conservative," said Rep. Steven King, R-Iowa.

And the label of "Dreier the moderate" seems to have stuck, although Dreier describes himself as a "small 'I' libertarian Republican."

He says he has four core beliefs: a free economy; a limited government; a strong national defense; and personal freedom.

He votes against abortion, but in support of stem cell research. He is a committed supply-sider and a vocal advocate of free trade. He has voted against giving amnesty to illegal immigrants but believes Congress must pass a temporary-worker program.

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His American Conservative Union lifetime rating is 92, higher than some of his critics'.

"I don't think he strikes many congressmen as a 'movement conservative.' He's a 'nice-guy conservative,'" Steel said.

Indeed, if Dreier aspires to be a "team player," that is exactly how he is seen by many. In interviews with nearly two dozen lawmakers, it was the most common description from admirers and detractors alike.

Democrats - often frustrated at what they see as heavy-handed decisions coming out of Dreier's committee that prevent them from bringing bills and amendments to the floor - also characterize him as "carrying the water" or "doing the bidding" of GOP leaders.

"consensus builder."

Republicans call him "loyal," a "good soldier," and a

Ornstein said Dreier's greatest strength - the ability to go on television and, with a sunny California disposition, make conservative issues sound moderate - may be the very thing that reinforces suspicions among hard-core conservatives.

Their impression of Dreier, he said, is of someone "a little too cosmopolitan, a little too polished. Not really one of them."

"He's more difficult to label than most," said Mike Johnson, a lobbyist in D.C. and former top Republican aide. "Because David Dreier is not a fiery, outspoken conservative ideologue, he's easily labeled as conservative, which he's not either."

For Monrovia Mayor Rob Hammond, all the labeling of Dreier is so much inside-the-Beltway gibberish.

The congressman he knows, he said, is someone who works from the center, brings money back to the Southland and

once spent an hour talking to school kids about Washington with no cameras and only two parents in the classroom.

Dreier recently announced he will be seeking re-election for a 14th term. Only time will tell what the brouhaha over his ideology will mean to his career.

"He has got one of the brightest futures around of any congressman around," Steel said, suggesting Dreier might find a perfect fit in trade negotiation, an ambassadorship or the State Department.

Others speculated that Hastert might create a new leadership post for him.

And Johnson said those who see Dreier's path up the leadership ladder forever blocked don't understand how Washington works.

"He took one for the team, and he hasn't complained or criticized. Particularly in Congress, which is a very clubby institution, those who are team players are always remembered and respected," he said. "David Dreier will come out ahead because of this, not behind."

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