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A stain on the House

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House Majority Leader Tom DeLay apologized last week for his assault on the federal judiciary, though it sounded like an apology more for his style than his substance. "... I said something in an inartful way, and I shouldn't have said it that way, and I apologize for saying it that way." Yes, that's what he said.

DeLay had suggested that the judiciary would be in the crosshairs of Congress because the courts didn't rule DeLay's way in the tragic case of Terri Schiavo. DeLay's comments looked to all the world like an effort to intimidate the judges because he didn't like the way they upheld the rule of law.

The guess here is that DeLay felt the need to back down because he's starting to get some heat from some fellow Republicans, who aren't happy that DeLay's various troubles are making the party look very bad. Republican Rep. Christopher Shays of Connecticut has called for DeLay to step down as majority leader. Shays, a moderate, has never been a DeLay fan. But other Republicans, on up to the White House, have not exactly been eager to defend the Texas lawmaker.

Even when DeLay apologized for lashing out at what he had called an "arrogant, out-of-control, unaccountable" federal judiciary, he didn't say he was wrong. He only said he didn't express himself clearly. He still wants Congress to look into judicial activism.

The problem for Republicans is that DeLay's troubles only seem to mount, and the notion that he's the victim of a Democratic Party/liberal media witch hunt just doesn't hold water. DeLay was admonished by the House Ethics Committee three times last year. That would be the Republican-controlled House Ethics Committee.

For the good of his party, DeLay needs to answer the questions that dog him about campaign contributions and lobbyist-paid trips and nepotism hires--and step aside as majority leader.

But Republican leaders have to go beyond that. They can't continue to aid the efforts by DeLay to dodge responsibility. The worst example is this: After the Ethics Committee rebuked DeLay for the third time, the GOP leadership neutered the Ethics Committee. The Republican chairman of the committee, Rep. Joel Hefley, was removed from his post over his objections, and the committee rules were changed so either party could block an investigation of a House member.

Republicans can argue that the committee chairmanship was due to rotate. But the rules change to block

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investigations was an incredibly blind and arrogant tactic. Don't blame DeLay for that one. Blame House Speaker Dennis Hastert for letting it happen.

Hastert may be calculating that his friend DeLay can survive this ethics mess without doing too much damage to his party before the 2006 midterm elections. But the decision to stop the Ethics Committee from effectively doing its business stains the entire GOP leadership.

A Gallup poll released last week said only 38 percent of Americans approve of the way Congress is handling its job, while 54 percent disapprove. Mr. Speaker?

Republicans have enjoyed a good, decade-long run in control of the House. Maybe so good they've forgotten that they took power in large part because voters were fed up with the arrogant, ethically questionable practices of Washington. It would be ironic if the GOP lost power for the same reason.

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