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ON THE WEB

## Diverting the War on Terrorism

Editorial  
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The recent dust-up over Republican attempts to gerrymander the Texas Congressional map had an overlay of old-fashioned political silliness and skullduggery. What is coming to be known as the Tom DeLay Power Perpetuation Act failed famously when more than 50 statehouse Democrats fled to Oklahoma, where they hid out until the bill died, depriving the Republican majority of a quorum. But it turns out that officials in Washington and Austin, desperate to round up the Democrats, made a platoon of Keystone Kops out of federal and state law enforcement agents. That is no laughing matter.

The new Department of Homeland Security was called in on the case as if it were the patronage police and the dissenting Democrats were terrorists. Mr. DeLay's office breathlessly passed along detailed intelligence on the fugitives. More than 1,000 hours were devoted to the two-day search by 54 Texas officers. At least one F.B.I. agent appears to have been involved in the search.

The fact that federal agencies were involved in the partisan squabble is outrageous. Investigators usually assigned to track down terrorists or drug smugglers were sent off to try to find a small plane that had ferried one of the missing Democrats out of Texas. Documents relating to the search were later destroyed -- in theory because the search did not involve a crime. Democrats are well within their rights to demand state and federal inquiries.

The original Republican plan to draw new Congressional districts in outrageously contorted forms in order to capture current Democratic seats was, at the very minimum, political dirty pool. But the idea that Republican honchos felt that they had the right to bring federal security forces into the case pushes the issue to a whole different level, one that smacks of a sense of entitlement and disrespect for normal legal boundaries.

This page was a consistent critic of the Clintons' ethics problems, but the former president's defenders should feel free to point out what kind of national outcry we would be hearing from talk show hosts and Congressional Republicans if anyone had tried to misuse the government's antiterrorism machinery this way during the last administration.

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