

Transportation investigator says agency erred in seeking Democrats

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A Transportation Department investigator said Tuesday that his agency mishandled politically motivated requests from House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and Texas officials during a statewide hunt for missing Democrats in May.

DeLay and the Texas Department of Public Safety received key flight information on former Texas Speaker Pete Laney's plane shortly after he and more than 50 other state Democrats fled to Ardmore, Okla., denying the House a quorum May 11-14 and derailing a DeLay-backed redistricting plan.

The manhunt, led by Republican Speaker Tom Craddick, was unsuccessful. State police were unable to force any of the Democrats back to work, despite having used the FAA data to figure out their location in Ardmore.

Three federal investigations have been launched, two of which have found no criminal wrong-doing.

"I think we mishandled it," Transportation Department Inspector General Kenneth Mead said Tuesday. But he said he didn't think DeLay's request was inappropriate. "I'm not going to make a judgment about Mr. DeLay. The issue is, how should the FAA respond to these requests."

To ensure it does not happen again, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta on Tuesday ordered new rules for the Federal Aviation Administration, which is in his department's jurisdiction.

They include a ban on releasing flight information, unless it concerns aviation safety or an official purpose. Agency employees also must find out why the information is needed, a direct response to the FAA's chief legislative liaison officer David Balloff's failure to ask DeLay's staff why his office wanted Laney's information.

All such requests must be documented, the new rules dictate. And any questionable requests, including those made by members of Congress, must be vetted by agency lawyers before they are carried out.

DeLay said Tuesday that the report proves he did nothing wrong. "We asked a question and it was answered, all straightforward and above board."

The House hearing, which was compelled by Rep. Gene Green, D- Houston, erupted several times Tuesday in partisan rancor. Green and other Democrats accused Republicans of trying to cover up what they called unethical attempts by DeLay to use federal resources for partisan purposes.

But House Transportation Committee Chairman Don Young, R-Alaska, said Texas Democrats were wasting the committee's time. Young characterized DeLay's request for information as "constituent services."

The FBI and the Homeland Security Department also were called to help in the GOP's manhunt for the missing Democrats.

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