Written by Rich Miller
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A little over a week ago, Illinois House Republican Leader Lee Daniels told his leadership team that he would seek re-election to his post in January. The announcement reportedly stunned his team members, who had been assured privately that Daniels would step down at the end of this term.

But Daniels changed his mind on Friday, finally noticing the obvious – that he could not be re-elected. Daniels' operation is under Justice Department scrutiny for paying his campaign workers with state funds, among other things. He lost much of his support in his caucus after he was forced out of the Illinois Republican Party chairmanship over the summer, and his dismal record of 18 out of 20 years in the minority didn't help his case much.

None of the state's GOP powers-that-be was with Daniels, nor would they be in January, when his caucus will elect its next leader. Even U.S. House Speaker Denny Hastert was quietly playing his hand. Hastert contributed about $100,000 to individual House Republican candidates, bypassing Daniels' House Republican Campaign Committee. Hastert will reportedly move another large pot of money to Illinois from a Washington, D.C., party account in the near future.

More importantly, though, the checks are being hand delivered by Representative Tom Cross of Oswego. The cover story is that Cross is a longtime Hastert friend and a neighbor, but Cross is also vying hard to replace Daniels in January. Handing out all those checks is surely helping that effort, not to mention that the checks are only going to people who are likely to back Cross come crunch time. Hastert, in effect, had thrown in his lot with Daniels' top opponent.

By staying in the race, Daniels could have helped elect his newly sworn enemy, Cross, instead of Representative Art Tenhouse of Liberty, who stuck by Daniels this summer when suburban members allied with Cross tried to oust the GOP leader. Tenhouse was not able to campaign for the top job while Daniels was running, which would have allowed Cross to pick up votes that Tenhouse might have otherwise received.

This story is filled with irony. Cross has been Daniels' Springfield housemate and jogging partner for years, and he was always a trusted lieutenant. Most people figured that Daniels was grooming Cross for the top leadership job. His Statehouse nickname is "Mini Lee." Tenhouse, on the other hand, has never been particularly close to Daniels, but he successfully defended Daniels during the aborted coup attempt and then all of a sudden found himself temporarily blocked from making the big move by the very guy he helped save.

Twelve years ago, Daniels' own floor leader, Representative Tom McCracken, turned on Daniels after a particularly brutal electoral thumping from the House Democrats. McCracken failed in large part because George Ryan convinced the big-money lobbyists and the House Republican rank-and-file to stick with Daniels. It was George Ryan who made Daniels the Republican leader in the first place, after Ryan gave up the House Speaker's job to run for lieutenant governor with Jim Thompson. And it was George Ryan who insisted that his friend Lee Daniels become state party chairperson this year, perhaps the most disastrous move of Daniels' entire career.

But George Ryan is retiring, so he can't be around to pull Daniels' rear out of the fire now. The lobbyists have already withheld their PAC money from the House Republican Campaign Committee in a strong vote of no confidence. The U.S. House Speaker is quietly backing Cross. Candidates in tough races can't take any money from Daniels for fear of appearing to be part of the Republican corruption problem. And incumbent rank-and-file House Republicans are beyond ready for a change.

Daniels has done many positive things for this state. He's the only legislative leader truly interested in policy issues. When he became speaker, he instigated the most sweeping changes to state law in decades. He has vastly improved the quality of care for – and the quality of life of – the developmentally disabled. The list goes on. But, it was time to go.

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