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## The Elephants in the Room

WITH SOLID MAJORITIES IN BOTH HOUSES OF THE LEGISLATURE AND CONTROL OF EVERY STATEWIDE OFFICE, REPUBLICANS ARE GIRDING FOR THE ULTIMATE BATTLE WITH THE REAL ENEMY IN THE 2006 ELECTIONS: OTHER REPUBLICANS.

by [Paul Burka](#)

JUST HOME FROM A WEEKEND TRIP in early November, state representative Tony Goolsby, of Dallas, went to his office and left his wife, Toppo, to check their voice mail messages. A few minutes later, Toppo called him. Most of the messages were routine, but there was one he needed to hear—an automated political poll. The first question was no surprise: Do you support Proposition 2, the constitutional amendment to defend traditional marriage? “Answer yes or no,” the robo-voice instructed. The next question took Tony completely by surprise. “If the election were held today, would you vote to reelect your state representative, Tony Goolsby?” It was the last thing he expected to hear—well, almost the last thing. *He* certainly hadn’t authorized the poll. There could be only one explanation: An unknown enemy was probing to see if he was vulnerable to a challenge. And then came the absolute last thing he expected to hear. “This poll was authorized and paid for by the Republican Party of Texas.” Was it possible that his own party was

interested in defeating him?

As it turned out, Goolsby wasn't the only Republican legislator whose constituents were polled about their representative by the state GOP. Others included Carter Casteel, of New Braunfels; Charlie Geren, of Fort Worth; Toby Goodman, of Arlington; Delwyn Jones, of Lubbock; Tommy Merritt, of Longview; and Todd Smith, of Euless. Smith, in particular, was outraged about the party's participation in the poll. He says he confronted Jeff Fisher, the executive director of the Texas GOP, who claimed that the poll about Prop 2 was taken statewide, in every legislative district. But were other Republican lawmakers singled out? "Show me the list of the state representatives whose constituents were polled," Smith said. Fisher refused. "Tell me how the list was compiled." Again, he refused. "Why did you poll in my district?" This time Fisher answered: "To help you in case you have a Democratic opponent," a response Smith characterized to me as "lying to my face." His district is so solidly Republican that David Dewhurst, running for lieutenant governor in 2002 as a virtual unknown, got 65 percent of the district's vote against veteran Democrat John Sharp. "What I want to know is where all this is leading," Smith told me. "Who is calling the shots?"

Where this is leading is toward all-out war in the 2006 Republican primary. Many Republicans outside the Capitol—especially on the far right—are angry about the failure of Republicans inside the Capitol to enact the conservative agenda on school finance, spending, and other litmus-test issues. In 2003, the first session of Republican rule in 130 years, everything had gone according to plan: budget cuts, tort reform, congressional redistricting, and new restrictions on abortion. Then, in 2005, the majority couldn't pass a school finance bill, provide property tax relief, impose budget restraints on local government, pass a school voucher program, or otherwise advance the ideological agenda embraced by Governor Rick Perry and such friends of the GOP as the influential Texas Public Policy Foundation, Republican National Committee member Bill Crocker, major donor James Leininger, and the authors of various conservative Internet newsletters. For months, speculation about a purge of Republican lawmakers who put the interests and desires of their constituents ahead of party orthodoxy has run rampant. If the anger of the ideologues can be transmitted to the GOP primary electorate (which, everyone agrees, is more conservative than the larger group of voters who

identify themselves as Republicans), the March primary could become a witch hunt for incumbents derisively labeled RINOs, as in Republicans in Name Only.

But Tony Goolsby, Todd Smith, and the rest of the group that got such unwelcome attention from the state party are hardly RINOs. On the vast majority of votes, especially social issues ranging from gay marriage to abortion, they seldom stray. They see themselves as mainstream Republicans beholden to no one except the voters who sent them to Austin, and they simply aren't going to support a school finance bill or a school voucher bill that's unpopular back home. (Goolsby, for example, polls his district by mail every election cycle on their views about vouchers, and the smallest negative response has been 56 percent.)



It is an odd story: Having devoured the Democrats, the Republicans have turned on one another. The consequences for the state have been severe. This became evident during the fight over school finance last spring, when Speaker Tom Craddick and Kent Grusendorf, the Republican chairman of the House Public Education Committee, kept pushing a bill that tossed out the old system and imposed a series of mandates, often unfunded, on school districts in the name of reform. Republican lawmakers were squeezed between the viewpoint of the leadership, which was openly hostile to the education community on ideological grounds, and that of the education community back home, which itself was openly hostile to the leadership on policy grounds. This squeeze, along with the much-remarked-upon infighting between Perry, Dewhurst, and Craddick (and sometimes Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn), prevented Republicans from producing a plan that had broad

backing inside and outside the Capitol. Now, with the self-sabotage at fever pitch and primary season approaching, the big question being asked in Texas political circles is, What should a real Republican stand for?

**Last summer I came across a Midland Web site** called Jessica's Well ([jessicawell.com](http://jessicawell.com)). A blogger calling himself "a&mgrad" had posted a plaintive comment about the direction his party was going. "Seems all it takes to be called a Republican these days in Midland and elsewhere is to be against abortion and gay rights and be for tax cuts and 'the spread of Democracy in the world,' and to hell with everything else."

It is the absence of "everything else" that mainstream Republicans mourn. Not too long ago, when the Democrats still ran the state, Republicans stood for a clear set of principles, among them limited government, fiscal restraint, free markets, private-property rights, local control, and individual liberty. But the realities of power and politics don't always mix so well with principle, and it doesn't take long to think of policies that violate each of the foregoing, right here in conservative Texas. Limited government? While the Legislature was wrestling unsuccessfully with school finance last summer, Senator Kyle Janek, of Houston, told me that the long fight had revealed to him how much politics had changed in the ten years since he had first won election to the House. "When I came here," he told me, "all the Republicans wanted to abolish the Texas Education Agency. Now I just voted for a bill to give the commissioner of education subpoena powers." Fiscal restraint? Not for Republican budget writers, who, as critics figure it, increased state spending by 20 percent compared with 2003—2004. Free markets? Not for electricity customers, who will have to pay higher rates because of a state mandate that utilities must supply a certain amount of power generated by wind. Private-property rights? Not if your property happens to be in the path of one of the mammoth toll roads Perry wants to build. Local control? Not if Republican ideologues, led by the governor, have their way and impose caps on the ability of cities and counties to raise and spend money. Individual liberty? Not if you want to have an abortion or you're gay and want to marry your partner.

I'm not charging Republicans with hypocrisy. When it comes to their own survival, politicians of all parties are the same: They talk the talk of philosophy, but sooner or later they walk the walk of expediency. The importance of the soul-searching going on among Republicans is that it

highlights what happens when the outs become the ins and find themselves torn between the ideology that propelled them to power and their responsibility to govern. If Republicans had been successful in governing, their ideological civil war would be of little import. But they haven't been.

The question is straight out of a government textbook: Should our elected representatives serve as delegates—that is, rubber stamps for party power brokers and the legislative leadership carrying out an ideological agenda—or trustees who are empowered by their constituents to make up their own minds? The tradition in Texas has been that the Legislature is not organized formally along party lines and that lawmakers act more like trustees than delegates. But as GOP activists seek to impose their definition of what a true conservative is on elected legislators, that tradition is in mortal danger.

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## The Elephants in the Room

by [Paul Burka](#)

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Nearly a century ago, a sharp-penned journalist named Ambrose Bierce defined a “conservative” as “a statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.” Bierce disappeared into revolutionary Mexico in 1913, never to be heard from again, but his observation about the role of ideology in politics retains its force. The search for the perfect doctrine, and the insistence that it be adhered to, is an exercise in futility. Ideological consistency is all but impossible in a system in which people who put politicians in office want them to address problems. Before Hurricane Katrina, no one wanted to federalize disaster relief at a cost running into the hundreds of billions of dollars. It’s amazing how the sight of bodies floating in the streets of New Orleans will change your perspective.

Still, nothing will dissuade the purists from demanding ideological consistency. The most heated battle in Texas politics—far more intense than the gubernatorial smackdown between Perry and Strayhorn or the endless sniping of Dewhurst and Craddick—is the debate over whether the party’s elected representatives have betrayed its principles and what the consequences for the heretics should be.

WHAT’S HAPPENING INSIDE the Republican party today is an inevitable consequence of political success. To win elections, a party must become a big-tent organization. But each time a new person is brought inside the tent—or shoves his way in—the likelihood of harmony diminishes. Today’s GOP consists of social conservatives with ties to evangelical Christianity, fiscal conservatives who reiterate anti-tax activist Grover Norquist’s injunction to “starve the beast” of government, business conservatives who want goodies from government but not regulation (unless it would work to their benefit),

libertarians, and mainstream conservatives who are neither political activists nor ideologues but are attracted to what the party stands for—supposedly.

The conflicts are self-evident and unavoidable: between social conservatives, who want to impose their ideas of morality on everything from cheerleading to marriage, and libertarians, who want government out of just about everything; between fiscal conservatives, who want to cut taxes and rein in spending on government services, and business conservatives, who want increased spending for some services, such as transportation and education, at all levels for their future workforce. Meanwhile, the mainstream conservatives are left to wonder what became of the party they once knew. I am reminded of what Karen Hughes, then the communications director for Governor George W. Bush, told me in 1996 when evangelical conservatives took control and refused to respect the unwritten rule that the governor gets to chair the state’s delegation to the national convention: “It’s my party, and I’ll cry if I want to.”

The recent legislative marathon, consisting of the regular session and two desultory special sessions on school finance, was suffused with doctrinal conflict. The issue that best exposed the fault lines between “starve the beast” ideologues and mainstream Republicans involved two Perry-backed proposals to choke off local governments’ access to money. One measure was aimed at limiting “appraisal creep”—annual increases in the value of real estate, as calculated by local officials for property tax purposes—to 5 percent. (The current cap is 10 percent.) Appraisal creep enables cities, counties, school districts, and other taxing authorities to take in more money each year, so long as property values increase, without raising their tax rates. Another bill sought to achieve the same end by limiting the revenue available to local governments to the previous year’s budget plus 3 percent. If a city or county wanted to exceed that limit, it would have to do so by raising the tax rate—but only with the approval of voters (the assumption being, of course, that the voters would never approve).

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## The Elephants in the Room

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Appraisal creep is a legitimate concern; repeated property tax increases can become such a burden on homeowners that they may be forced to sell their homes. But the proponents of appraisal and revenue caps ran up against another principle straight out of traditional conservatism: local control, the idea that the government that governs best is the one that's closest to the people. When Republicans were out of power in Texas, they assailed Democrats for imposing mandate after mandate—often unfunded—on local government. Echoing Barry Goldwater, the godfather of modern conservatism (“I fear Washington and centralized government more than I do Moscow”), they rejected the idea that all wisdom flowed from Austin. If local control was a tried-and-true idea in Democratic Texas, then it ought to make even more sense in Republican Texas, where most GOP legislators represent cities, counties, and school districts whose elected officials are overwhelmingly Republican (although city and school elections are officially nonpartisan). Yet the caps were the ultimate mandate. Fred Hill, a longtime conservative stalwart from Richardson and a strong proponent of local control, led the fight against the caps and likened them to Proposition 13 in California, which devastated the ability of local governments to perform basic services. Of the 86 Republicans in the House, 35 voted for a Democratic amendment that killed appraisal caps. Only a Democratic blunder allowed revenue caps to pass the House; later, the proposal died in the Senate.

Another high-visibility issue that gave Republicans “heartburn”—the euphemism du jour for being scared to death of getting a primary opponent—was the increased level of state spending. The Republican leadership reached a rare (if unspoken) consensus that the Legislature should restore state services reduced or eliminated in 2003, when lawmakers faced a

\$10 billion revenue shortfall. Outside the Legislature, however, no such consensus existed. The Texas Public Policy Foundation was particularly unhappy; as budget writers were putting the finishing touches on the new spending bill last May, the TPPF's vice president, Michael Quinn Sullivan, warned in a press release that spending might increase as much as 15 percent (which turned out to be an underestimation) and urged lawmakers to exercise fiscal restraint. After lauding the Legislature for cutting spending in the face of the 2003 budget crisis, Sullivan lamented, "By all accounts that same discipline does not seem to be in place today." His concerns fell on deaf ears: Not one Republican senator voted against the budget, and only 11 House Republicans did so (along with 29 Democrats). Those on the inside understand that voting for the budget is part of the responsibility of being in power. But will Republican primary voters care about such nuances when a challenger accuses an incumbent of voting to increase spending by 20 percent? Jim Pitts, of Waxahachie, the much-admired chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, is about to find out: He has an announced primary opponent.

"They're clueless," says Senator Steve Ogden, of Bryan, the Senate's chief budget writer, of the critics of the new spending bill. "Go back to May of '03," he says. "We passed a bill that spent \$118 billion. That's what the critics are comparing to \$140 billion to justify saying that we increased spending twenty percent. But total state spending for the biennium, when you count the emergency appropriations bill we pass every session, was \$127 billion. Then \$140 billion really represents a ten percent increase, not twenty percent." Ogden is one of many lawmakers whose conservative credentials have previously been regarded as impeccable, only to have them challenged in the GOP's eat-your-young frenzy. This session, he stood up for budget savings against entrenched opposition, insisting on a plan, opposed by doctors, that is estimated to result in savings of \$109 million per biennium for the costly Medicaid program and scotching a pork barrel program for a good cause (state universities), known as tuition revenue bonds, because it violated the state's pay-as-you-go rule. "It's a fiction," he told me, "just a way to issue general-obligation bonds without asking the people to vote on them."

Ogden owns up to following the course set by previous legislatures of resorting to budgetary legerdemain to make ends meet. But, he insists, "This

is a fiscally responsible budget. It's a ten percent increase over a two-year period, corresponding roughly to the growth of the economy and still leaving enough unspent to have a \$3 billion surplus. Grover Norquist, you're full of bull."

THE CENTRAL FIGURE in the Republican drama is Speaker Craddick. So far there have been no casualties in the War Between Republicans, but he has suffered the most wounds. Craddick came to the Legislature in 1969, when there were only eight Republicans, and he has seen scores, maybe hundreds, of GOP colleagues come and go. He has close ties to only a few House members; his real loyalties lie with people outside the Capitol—Republican power brokers like Leininger, Louis Beecherl, of Dallas, and tort reformer Dick Weekley and lobbyists Bill Messer and Bill Miller. Hard to pin down ideologically, he is more of a traditional business and economic conservative—particularly if the business happens to be oil and gas or real estate, professions in which he has amassed a sizable fortune and which drive the economy of his hometown of Midland—than a social conservative. Nevertheless, he identifies with his party far more than any Democratic Speaker of memory ever did, and he regards it as his duty to push its agenda.

This is the source of his problems. As members have always seen it, part of the role of the Speaker is to protect them from no-win situations in which they make enemies regardless of how they vote. Appraisal caps and revenue caps were two such situations. Vote against them and you anger the ideologues (including Perry, who was pushing for the caps). Vote for them and you anger your local officials who are fellow Republicans and see your constituents every day while you are off in Austin. Neither proposal had the votes to pass without Craddick's twisting arms to get them. So he twisted arms, particularly on revenue caps. Every member understood what had happened: Their Speaker had cast his lot with the outside-the-Capitol crowd.

The same thing happened in the school finance battle. Grusendorf's bill was anathema to the education community, though it had support from fiscal conservatives and some educational reformers. Rather than try to find a middle ground, Craddick resorted to arm-twisting, once again putting his members in the position of going against superintendents and school board members back in their districts. In fairness to Craddick, he had to pass a school finance bill, but he didn't have to pass one that many Republicans

hated. He had to pass a tax bill too; it was necessary to replace the revenue that would have been lost due to proposed property tax reductions, had they passed. But his favored method of raising revenue—allowing businesses to choose between a payroll tax, which many Republicans saw as a roundabout tax on income, and a tax on business partnerships, which *was* a tax on income—was sure to be controversial. (It was not lost on Republican members that these taxes were good for the oil and gas industry, leading some critics to call it the “Fair to Midland” plan.)

Sometimes GOP legislators found themselves facing a dilemma to which there was no safe answer—for example, a motion to kill a proposed increase in the tax on beer and other alcoholic beverages. Voting against killing the increase would anger the fiscal conservatives who oppose anything that smacks of a new tax. Voting for killing the increase would anger social conservatives—in particular, the Texas Eagle Forum—who oppose all sin. Thirty-three Republicans decided that the safer haven was to oppose sin. Sure enough, the vote was one of 25 chosen by the Eagle Forum (“Progress Through Preservation of Traditional Values”) for its postsession conservative rating of all House members. Forum president Cathie Adams, while praising one of the most staunchly conservative members, provided this sorrowful jeremiad: “Of the 181 elected Texas legislators serving during the [Seventy-ninth] Legislative Session and special called sessions in Austin, only 11 legislators were commended for their conservative voting record.”

Let’s not feel too sorry for lawmakers who have to cast dangerous votes; that’s part of the job. What particularly rankles members is that many of those votes were demanded of Republicans by their own leader. To make matters worse, Craddick had declared war on the education groups by blaming superintendents for the Legislature’s inability to pass a school finance bill. “They just want money, and they don’t want any changes in the system,” the Speaker was quoted as saying by the *San Antonio Express-News* three days before the second special session expired. One San Antonio—area superintendent returned fire: “Those people, and the Speaker especially, see public education as a liability, not as an asset....They want to find anything else that’s cheaper.” Craddick is not alone in his assessment of educators, inside or outside the Capitol, but many of his Republican members—particularly those from rural areas and newer suburbs—come from

districts where the schools are well regarded and are the center of their communities. Yet they were pressured to vote against proposals that would have given their school districts more money.

And that's not the worst of it. Many suburban members also cast a series of votes undercutting the programs and values that are most important to their schools. One amendment proposed to protect funding for the master science and math teachers program. It was killed in a virtually straight party-line vote. Another proposal ensured that funding for advanced placement programs would not be cut. AP classes are filled with the kids of Republican primary voters who are desperate to get their children into top colleges. It didn't matter; Republicans voted no. How about allowing a child who is assaulted by another child to be kept away from him? Sorry, no. (A separate bill allowing the victim to transfer to another school was later passed.) This by no means exhausts the lists of such votes, but you get the idea. Why did Republicans cast such dangerous votes? Because Tom Craddick forced them to, even if it meant that Republican members had to vote against their districts' interests. This has nothing to do with good government or good leadership and everything to do with Craddick's intense dislike of losing any vote for any reason, especially when Democrats are on the other side.

Nor are his members supposed to stand up for the public schools. When he became Speaker, Craddick did not reappoint Todd Smith, a longtime advocate for schools, to the Public Education Committee. Bob Griggs, of North Richland Hills, a retired superintendent who last session was appointed by Craddick to the education committee, voted against school vouchers and met the same fate this session. Griggs endured his banishment in silence, which he broke only to make a memorable speech against Grusendorf's education bill and the leadership's malevolence toward superintendents, and, to no one's surprise, announced his intention to retire after just two terms. Then, to everyone's surprise, Griggs struck back from his political grave, issuing a statement that was a call to arms for educators (including school board members) to run for the Legislature: "I...have witnessed and battled a misguided and widely held belief in the Legislature that established educators are the problem with education and that the system cannot be fixed without wiping the slate clean and starting over from scratch...There is more here than just one retired superintendent can handle without additional reinforcement.

It is for this reason I am putting out this call to enlist more administrators, more educators, and more school board members to answer the call. Texas needs you to...come to Austin to fight for the needs of the schoolchildren of Texas, to challenge the false belief held by so many of my legislative colleagues.”

At least twenty education-community candidates have emerged to challenge House GOP incumbents, who will have to defend those votes against fully funding AP classes and similar issues in the GOP primary. (Senators, with huge districts and war chests to match, face no such threat.) The conventional wisdom is that the education challengers are underdogs because they won't be able to raise money and may hold other views (such as being pro-choice) that will torpedo their candidacies. Maybe so. But school board members have previously run in their communities, just as legislators have, and their names are before the public too. And in rural and new suburban areas, the schools enjoy widespread support—except, in some instances, from their own legislators.

Meanwhile, what does Craddick do? He can no longer be sure of having a working majority in the House. He might try backing conservative challengers over GOP incumbents who have defied his wishes, but that is a dangerous game, and if he loses, he would turn someone who has supported him in the past into an implacable enemy. Craddick has told several of the members whose districts were polled by the state party that he will support all Republican incumbents. Of course, he can always sit back while others who have grievances against incumbents—perhaps Leininger or Perry—take the lead. In El Paso, for example, Perry's biggest supporters are backing a challenger to veteran incumbent Pat Haggerty, a mainstream Republican. The more prudent way for Craddick to increase his majority is to go after Democratic incumbents, several of whom won by narrow margins in 2004, and no doubt Republicans will make an all-out effort to do so. They will surely pick up the seat held by the retiring former Speaker, Pete Laney. But Democrats think they have a good chance to wrest a few seats from Republicans too, and 2006 isn't shaping up as a great GOP year.

It is too strong to say that Craddick's position as Speaker is in danger. But it isn't far away. As the result of his leadership—or the lack thereof—Craddick has alienated a number of GOP lawmakers who originally supported him for

Speaker. Loose lips sink ships and political careers, so it is impossible to say how many malcontents there are. Some put the number as high as thirty, but already there has been attrition, with the retirement of Griggs and several other Craddick critics. And it is one thing to be disgruntled and quite another to attempt to overthrow a sitting Speaker. Still, the idea has taken hold among his strongest GOP critics in the House that he has seen so many members come and go that he is indifferent about who occupies a seat, so long as it is a Republican, and if a veteran mainstream lawmaker loses to an ideologue, so much the better for Craddick.

Craddick's actions in the last session—demanding votes that expose members to defeat—have fed these suspicions. For all his institutional knowledge, resourcefulness, and connections to Republican power brokers, he has become more of an obstacle to his party's ability to govern than an asset. Dewhurst would turn cartwheels to see him go, and Perry has become disenchanted by his intransigence. This much is certain: With around fifty Democrats sworn to bring him down, and at least a dozen longtime enemies inside the Republican caucus looking for a chance to do the same, it will take a defection of only fifteen or so GOP lawmakers to reach the 76 votes necessary to unseat him. In a Robespierrean twist, the Speaker, once the hero of the revolution that brought the Republicans to power, is looking more and more like the villain. ✚

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