

# Democratic Party Challenged By Indictments

**BYLINE:** JOE RUTHERFORD, Daily Journal

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Mississippi's Democratic Party could be both hurt and helped to reshape by indictments and pleadings in federal court related to charges against nationally prominent plaintiffs' attorney Richard "Dickie" Scruggs of Oxford, longtime observers said this week.

Joey Langston, a prominent trial lawyer from Booneville, and Steve Patterson, a former state auditor, entered guilty pleas to conspiracy charges involving attempts to bribe judges. Both are high-profile Democrats whose pleas were made public Monday.

Scruggs, Patterson and Langston are widely known as financial contributors to some Democratic Party candidates, although Scruggs also has been a heavy Republican contributor.

Scruggs, Patterson and others were charged Nov. 28 with attempting to bribe Circuit Court Judge Henry Lackey of Calhoun City, who is cooperating with federal investigators.

Langston was implicated in a case over legal fees from a national asbestos lawsuit.

Mississippi State University political scientist Marty Wiseman said the indictments and pleas are "very significant" for the Democratic Party because of the amount of money contributed by plaintiffs' lawyers to Democratic candidates.

"It is no longer a day for candidates spending a lot of sweat and a little money and having it pay off," Wiseman commented.

The expense of television and other advertising, the cost of consultants, staff and polling require huge sums, he said.

## **Impact on Hood?**

The Democrats' only statewide officeholder, Attorney General Jim Hood, is closely identified with Langston personally and politically. Langston has been a significant contributor to Hood's campaigns.

Hood also hired Langston to seek recovery of money owed Mississippi by MCI, the derelict telecommunications giant that had been headquartered in Mississippi.

Langston negotiated a payment of \$114 million to the state treasury, and he was paid \$14 million for the work, a sum approved by the courts.

Wiseman said that, had Langston's problems been known six or eight weeks before the 2007 general elections, it might have spelled political trouble for Hood, a Houston native.

Hood and Langston were sharply and repeatedly criticized by Hood's Republican opponent, Walnut native and Gulfport attorney Al Hopkins, for Hood's ties to Langston and the outsourcing of the lawsuit to the Langston firm.

Langston gave Hood more than \$100,000 for the 2007 campaign.

"What Hood did was continue what Mike Moore started," Wiseman said, referring to the former attorney general's use of outside firms.

It was Moore who hired Scruggs to sue tobacco companies for recovery of tax funds spent treating indigent patients suffering from tobacco-induced diseases. Scruggs was paid about \$800 million in that settlement deal.

How Hood fares, Wiseman said, will depend on his standing in relation to the Scruggs-Langston investigation and "how long the public's memory is."

### **General damage**

Wiseman said he believes the indictments and widespread allegations have damaged the legal profession generally because the public doesn't differentiate between plaintiffs' attorneys and corporate defense firms.

"It tarnishes the whole legal profession," Wiseman said.

Wiseman, who heads the Stennis Institute of Government, said trial lawyers' ability to make very large contributions already had been compromised by tort reforms in Mississippi – laws limiting the amounts paid in damages in successful lawsuits against corporations and individuals.

University of Mississippi journalism professor Curtis Wilkie, a former international political reporter, agreed generally with Wiseman's assessment.

"This whole case certainly has not been helpful to Democrats, who have reason to be troubled and concerned," Wilkie said. The Corinth native was a longtime reporter for The Boston Globe, and periodically covered Mississippi and politics, including a tenure as head of the Globe's bureau in New Orleans.

However, Wilkie said he does not think the indictments and lawsuits have damaged the mainstream Democratic progressives, a group he said is identified with former Gov. William Winter and former Secretary of State Dick Molpus, neither of whom has been in any way linked to Scruggs' problems.

Wilkie said he is uncertain about what impact the prosecutions and indictments might have on Democratic senatorial campaigns of Ronnie Musgrove and Ronnie Shows.

Musgrove is a former governor who lost his re-election bid to Republican Haley Barbour in 2003. Shows is a former state senator and was a Democratic congressman from the former 4th District from 1999 to 2003.

Both are running in a special election against U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker, appointed by Gov. Barbour to the seat vacated by the stunning, unexpected resignation in late 2007 of former Sen. Trent Lott, a Republican. Wicker, a Republican from Tupelo, is the former 1st District congressman.

Lott is Scruggs' brother-in-law, but his name so far has not been linked to alleged illegality.

"A hard look needs to be taken internally by the Democrats," Wiseman added. "They have been wandering in the wilderness, and the core of the party has to be rebuilt."