

OPPONENT CLAIMS FBI RECORDED PHONE CALLS INVESTIGATING STEARNS BRIBERY ALLEGATIONS, PROHIBITED RECORDING BOEHNER



Cliff Stearns (left) in happier days, when he could play dress-up to visit Gitmo and strike his best Abu Ghraib pose.

There is a convoluted series of allegations and counterclaims between Representative Cliff Stearns (R-FL) and Clay County Clerk of Court James Jett, his Republican opponent in the Third Congressional District in Northern Florida created by the latest redistricting. The FBI appears to have gotten involved, going so far as to record phone calls and to be aware Stearns' opponent would wear a wire. Stunningly, both the Florida Times Union and Gainesville Sun are reporting that the FBI warned Jett not to record House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) either on the phone or at the meeting in which Jett was wired. Boehner had been expected to attend the Stearns fundraiser where Jett wore the wire, but appears to have not shown up.

The prospect of John Boehner appearing in a clandestinely recorded conversation in North Florida brings back memories of the fateful recording of then Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich directly breaking his agreement with

the House Ethics Committee and coordinating the Republican response to his ethics charges. In December, 1996, a couple in North Florida were listening to their police scanner and picked up the call in which Gingrich coordinated the response to the ethics charges to which he had admitted guilt on that same day. John Boehner was on that call. The couple recorded the call and handed the recording off to Representative Karen Thurman (D-FL) who forwarded it to the Ethics Committee. The legality of recording the call and handing the recording over was a point of dispute.

In the current dispute, Jett claims that Stearns initially had planned to support him as a Congressional candidate, but when Stearns' current residence was put into a new district where he would face Rich Nugent (R-FL), who was elected for the first time in 2010, Stearns decided that he would relocate to Orange Park in the new third district and run from there.

From the Times Union:

Jett accused former state Education Commissioner Jim Horne and Orange Park Republican Jud Sapp of being middlemen and offering everything from money to appointed political positions.

/snip/

Federal law prohibits candidates from promising job appointments in return for campaign support.

Jett said one offer included a job on Stearns' campaign staff that would pay him to cover the approximately \$25,000 he had spent on his congressional run. He also said he was told there could be a job heading the Florida Department of Law Enforcement or a U.S. marshal position once there are vacancies.

From the Sun:

Horne reportedly said Stearns and House Speaker John Boehner were prepared to finalize the deal with Jett at a Stearns fundraiser on March 2 at the home of Jud Sapp, a prominent GOP donor from Orange Park.

/snip/

Jett, a former police officer, said he and his brother Joey, a Clay County sheriff's deputy, then visited Sheriff Rick Beseler and a state prosecutor.

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Jett said the FBI subsequently contacted him about investigating the allegations. The agency reportedly planned to wire-tap his phone to record conversations with the pitchmen acting on Stearns' behalf.

There was one caveat, however. The FBI agents were directed by their supervisors not to record Boehner, Jett claims. Jett said he did not know why, but he didn't mind. He said he could not be sure Boehner knew what was being done in his name anyway.

Last Thursday, at the FBI's request, Jett said he called Horne and Sapp and agreed to give up his bid and that he would accept the offers. The FBI recorded both conversations, Jett said.

The Sun article goes on to note that Jett claims to have been fitted with a wire with the knowledge of the FBI for the Stearns fundraiser where Boehner was expected to be present, but was warned again by the FBI not to record Boehner. The Times Union describes the same thing:

Jett said he asked about wearing a microphone to the party at Sapp's house, but the FBI wouldn't let him wear a wire in Boehner's presence.

Predictably, Stearns' spokesman is reacting with outrage, claiming (ironically) that none of those accused of making the bribery arrangements were authorized to speak for Stearns.

Jett is not new to this sort of situation. From the Times Union article:

This is the second time Jett has said someone has tried to pay him, illegally, for politics. A Clay County man was convicted in 1990 for offering Jett, then a county commissioner, \$30,000 for his vote. Tape recordings were used in that case, by the State Attorney's Office.

Why would the FBI get involved in a bribery case that has all the earmarks of illegal attempts influence a candidate for a federal office, but preemptively exclude John Boehner from the investigation? Is Boehner too important to investigate?

Postscript: I have been saddled with Cliff Stearns as my representative since the last time district lines were re-drawn. He ousted Karen Thurman after her Democratic district where I reside was carved up. For those less familiar with him, Stearns first became visible on the national scene when he joined with a few other fringe Republicans to protest Sesame Street introducing an HIV-positive character in 2002. Stearns brought further shame to the district last year when he introduced an amendment to a bill for medical care for 9/11 first responders, requiring that their names be checked against the terrorist watch list before being eligible for health care. Stearns' other recent lowlights include his bill that passed the House requiring all states to honor concealed-carry permits from other states and his insertion of himself into "investigating" Planned Parenthood.