

Dreier's support for border agents draws fire  
By Fred Ortega Staff Writer  
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Rep. David Dreier's recent support for two imprisoned U.S. Border Patrol agents - a cause celebre among anti-illegal immigration activists - has not endeared him to some of those lobbying for the agents' release.

The San Dimas Republican sent a letter last week, along with fellow Republican Congressmen Jim Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin and Lamar Smith of Texas, urging President George W. Bush to review the case of agents Ignacio Ramos and Jose Compean and, "if appropriate," grant them pardons.

Ramos and Compean are each serving more than 10 years in federal prison after being convicted of shooting a fleeing, unarmed drug smuggler while patrolling the U.S. -Mexico border near El Paso, Texas, in February 2005.

Federal prosecutors said the agents violated the Mexican national's civil rights and then tried to cover up the incident.

Supporters of Ramos and Compean say the two men were only doing their job securing the country's borders and the case is indicative of what they consider the Bush administration's soft stance on immigration reform.

Many in the Republican party's conservative wing have championed the agents' cause.

Joe Loya, Ramos' father-in-law, was warmly greeted over the weekend at the California Republican Assembly's annual convention in Ontario. At the same gathering, Rep. Ed Royce, R-Fullerton, and Rep. Gary Miller, R-Brea, asked party members to support the agents and lobby against immigration reform measures that include "guest worker" programs, which they likened to amnesty for criminals.

Dreier's spokeswoman, Jo Maney, said the congressman had been monitoring the agents' case since the beginning.

"He has already been in contact with the Department of Justice," Maney said Monday. Dreier, she added, was meeting with a delegation from Lebanon and unavailable to comment.

"He felt that at this point, the most appropriate way to move forward was with this letter," Maney said.

Some of the agents' supporters said Dreier's move was hypocritical, in light of his past support for guest worker programs.

Dreier supported Bush's 2004 guest-worker initiative, arguing on his Web site that it did not amount to amnesty because it would not "grant automatic and immediate legal status" to illegal immigrants. Bush's plan would have allowed illegal immigrants to pay a fee and join a temporary worker program, and those who chose to stay and pursue citizenship would have had to get in line behind those who had already begun the process.

But in May 2006, Dreier came out against a Senate bill that incorporated the president's guest-worker initiative, supporting instead House legislation that included the building of a border fence and no temporary worker provisions.

Dreier's support of the convicted border agents did not surprise Douglas Johnson, a fellow at the Rose Institute for State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College.

"In his last re-election campaign he got endorsed by the Border Patrol union, and he has been close to them for a while, so it is in line with that," said Johnson.

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Another pet project of Dreier's, the creation of so-called counterfeit-proof Social Security Cards, was first proposed by TJ Bonner, president of the National Border Patrol Council.

"As far as building a fence along the border, more secure IDs and more Border Patrol agents, he has always been in support of that," Johnson said.

But Don Silva of Save Our State, an anti-illegal immigrant group, said Dreier's letter was motivated by political survival.

"He doesn't give a rip about Ramos and Compean," said Silva. "He's come out in favor of \ programs before. But the Ramos and Compean case is so universally condemned, you would be a complete moron if you were a congressman in a Republican district and were not in favor of reviewing this."

The adoption of the immigration issue by GOP hard-liners - and Dreier's dwindling margins of victory in his solidly Republican district in the last two elections - may be contributing to his hardening stance on immigration.

Ken Champeau of "The John and Ken Show" on KFI AM-640, a longtime critic of Dreier's immigration stance, said the congressman is catering to his party's right wing.

"A couple of constituents that are also listeners of ours are supposed to meet soon with Dreier about Ramos and Compean," said Champeau on Monday from Washington, where he and others were lobbying against amnesty and in support of the agents. "He may be preparing for that meeting by issuing the press release in support of the pardon.

"\ is pretty good about putting out the right things at the right time," he added.

His partner was more critical of Dreier.

"This is one of his weasel moves," said John Kobylt. "\ Dana Rohrabacher \ was holding press conferences months ago, threatening Bush with impeachment on this issue. Now a few days before our meeting here \ offers one of his mealy-mouthed press releases. If he appeared on TV or radio on this he would be far more effective than stamping his name on a letter."

Maney denied that Dreier's signing of the letter had anything to do with criticism from the far right.

"As I said, he has been following the two agents' situation since the beginning," said Maney, adding that Dreier has opposed all "amnesty-granting" legislation in the past.