

Worst-Kept Secret in D.C.: Jim DeMint Is Out at Heritage Foundation

The current “worst-kept secret in Washington” is the rumor that former U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) is being ousted as president of the conservative Heritage Foundation.

In a town that loves rumors and conspiracies, this new one put a torch on a pile of powder kegs within conservative circles. And, it exposed yet another dividing line within the “big tent” of the Republican Party.

DeMint, arguably, is the father of the modern conservative movement—some might also suggest the term “godfather,” but the former seems more appropriate. He left the Senate mid-term at a time when conservatism was on the ropes following a string of Democratic political victories to take over the think tank, and in the years that have followed, a string of conservative victories has ensued.

But many in the Republican Party have attempted to pain those successes as coming in spite of DeMint’s activism, not because of it. Clearly, he rocked the boat with the Washington establishment, much the way he did as a member of the Senate—where he was frequently graded its most conservative member.

The first question the new rumor prompts is whether or not this is a “shakeup” brought on following a disagreement over direction with the Heritage Board of Directors, as *Politico* reported when it broke the story, or if it is a “coup” triggered by dissatisfied donors who say DeMint wasn’t as pro-Trump as he should’ve been, as *The New York Times* reported in its own story. President Donald Trump seemed to weigh in on that with his speech over the weekend in Harrisburg, Pa.,

where he heaped high praise on the former senator.

Regardless, all fingers seem to be pointing toward Rebekah Mercer, who is both a member of the Heritage Board of Directors and a high-level donor to the organization. She is the daughter of billionaire hedge fund creator Robert Mercer, who helped propel the president to victory last November.

The Mercers have been a growing influence in GOP circles for nearly a decade, and now rival the more libertarian-leaning Koch brothers (who opposed Trump throughout the 2016 campaign). This latest move could be seen as a means to further build on that influence during the Trump presidency.

Or, as Tufts University professor Daniel W. Drezner suggested in an op-ed for *The Washington Post*, the whole incident could have been triggered by a breakdown in the relationship between DeMint and Heritage Action CEO Michael Needham. He suggests that while they were ideologically aligned, they disagreed often on issues of process and strategy.

Needham, he wrote, has created more relationships with Capitol Hill staffers, which could have endeared him more with the board of directors and the donors alike.

That's another question that only time will answer.

According to all of the reporting so far, DeMint's fate with Heritage has been sealed—despite 11th-hour efforts from his former colleagues in Congress—but the organization has been tight-lipped about the transition. It is widely expected that former Heritage president Ed Feulner will serve in an interim capacity until a permanent replacement is selected.

The next unanswered question is who will replace DeMint. With the Mercer connection, many have speculated it could be White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon. However, Drezner's speculation that it could be Needham seems a little more plausible. Even with the Mercers' growing influence in GOP

circles, Bannon is still seen as a bit too “controversial” for most of the donor class.

That’s not going to change anytime soon.

As for DeMint’s future, don’t expect him to run for public office anytime soon—perhaps ever. Some had speculated he might try to challenge Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) from the right in 2020, or run to replace Ambassador Nikki Haley, the former Palmetto State governor, but his longtime aide, Ellen Weaver, has quickly put the kibosh on that rumor.

“He left the Senate because he believed he could make a bigger impact outside the system,” she said in an interview with a South Carolina news outlet. “If anyone doubts he was right about that, three words: Justice Neil Gorsuch.” {eo}