

Congressional scandal

Foiled

Cold hard cash, and other obvious puns

William Jefferson, a Democratic congressman from New Orleans, allegedly likes to keep bundles of cash in his freezer. The FBI does not think this is cool. Last year, according to an affidavit released on May 21st, Mr Jefferson accepted a suitcase containing \$100,000 from a businesswoman seeking contracts in Nigeria and Ghana. The FBI says it found \$90,000 of this in Mr Jefferson's freezer, stacked in foil-wrapped bundles.

The businesswoman claims that Mr Jefferson, the chairman of the congressional caucus on Nigeria, solicited bribes to help her business. She told the FBI and agreed to wear a wire. Mr Jefferson was recorded complaining about "all these damn notes we're writing to each other... as if the FBI is watching." Agents raided his congressional office on May 20th. Mr Jefferson has not been indicted and insists he has done nothing wrong.

Different people find different aspects of this story upsetting. For some in Congress, an FBI raid on a congressman's office is an outrageous breach of the separation of powers between Congress and the executive branch. This is the first time a sitting congressman's office has been raided in that way. John Boehner, the House majority leader, predicted that the case would end up at the Supreme Court.

For others, there is racism afoot, since Mr Jefferson is black. Democrats regret that Mr Jefferson's woes muddy their campaign message that Republicans have a unique "culture of corruption". For Nigerians, the big shock is that Mr Jefferson allegedly said he needed to pay off Nigerian officials, including one very senior one.

For the people of New Orleans, it has been a mixed week. Their man in Washington may be in trouble, but their mayor, Ray Nagin, was re-elected on May 20 . Mr Nagin is best-known for losing his cool during Hurricane Katrina. He was also accused of race-baiting during his re-election campaign: he said he wanted his town to be a "chocolate city" and remarked to a black audience that "very few" of his primary opponents "look like us". But a slim majority of voters did not seem to mind. New Orleans is a tolerant place.