

Hunter's indictment threatens a dynasty

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USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — As political careers go, U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter had it all.

He was first elected in 2008 after his well-regarded father with the same name retired after 28 years in Congress. The younger Hunter impressed voters in a veteran-rich Republican district by having signed up for the Marines after the 2001 terrorist attacks and going on to serve tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. As one of the first members of Congress to endorse Donald Trump for president, Hunter's future couldn't have looked brighter.

Now Hunter and wife Margaret face a 60-count federal indictment alleging conspiracy, wire fraud, and misspending and falsification of campaign-finance records. The indictment details more than \$250,000 in personal spending with campaign funds, from \$462.46 for 30 shots of tequila and a steak at a bachelor party to \$250 to transport a pet, identified in media reports as likely being the family rabbit.

Having routinely used campaign funds as a personal bank account for everything from daily expenses to fancy vacations to Italy, Hawaii and Las Vegas and then engaged in cover-ups, as alleged in the indictment, Hunter and his political legacy could be brought to a crashing halt.

'Set for life'

"He was set for life," said Steven Erie, a professor emeritus at the University of California, San Diego, and author of "Paradise Plundered: Fiscal Crisis and Governance Failures in San Diego." Given the magic of the Hunter name, "they had a dynasty into perpetuity."

Hunter's alleged misdeeds become the latest political scandal to rock otherwise placid, laid-back San Diego County, 120 miles south of Los Angeles. It recalls the downfall of another well-connected congressman, Randy "Duke" Cunningham, a decorated former Navy pilot who resigned in 2005 after being caught in a bribery scandal. And the troubles aren't limited to Republicans. Democratic Mayor Robert Filner resigned five years ago and faced charges arising from a sexual harassment case.

"There's always been a culture of corruption down here," Erie said.



Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., center, was still a rising star on Capitol Hill in 2011. He was first elected in 2009 to his father's former seat. CAROLYN KASTER/AP

Hunter, 41, steadfastly denies allegations in the indictment, issued Tuesday on a day in which headlines were dominated by the conviction of former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort and a guilty plea by longtime Trump lawyer Michael Cohen. Hunter invokes Trump's name in saying he is the victim of another "witch hunt" by the Justice Department.

Yet there is no answer to an overarching question: How a congressman with a salary of \$174,000 a year plus perks managed to overspend to such an extent that he would have needed to dip deeply into campaign funds even for mundane household expenses? The indictment lays out multiple instances in which the Hunter family appeared to be down to its last dimes, diverting campaign funds to cover bank accounts that had dwindled to a few dollars or gone into the red.

Hint of scandal

It wasn't the first time the hint of scandal had touched the family. In 1992, his father, then-Rep. Duncan L. Hunter, was cleared of criminal wrongdoing in a House banking scandal that enveloped members of Congress from both parties. The elder Hunter had written 399 overdrafted checks that were covered by the House's informal banking system.

But few would have expected his son, Duncan Duane Hunter, to have encountered those kinds of financial issues. To political kingmakers, he appeared special from the start. Born on Pearl Harbor Day, Dec. 7, in the nation's bicentennial year, 1976, he graduated from a high

school in his district, Granite Hills in El Cajon, and earned his business degree from San Diego State University. After that, he worked as a business analyst.

His defining moment, however, came after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 when he said he marched straight to the Marine Corps recruiting office. As an artillery officer, he served two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan before returning home in 2005 and continuing to serve in the reserves, where he was promoted to the rank of major in 2012.

Hunter and his wife have two daughters and a son. He is listed as representing the district from Alpine, a small rural community east of San Diego. His inland district is far more blue-collar and conservative than coastal San Diego. In the 2016 presidential race, the 50th District, which also includes parts of Riverside County, voted 54.6 percent for Trump compared to 39.6 percent for Clinton. San Diego County, as a whole, went the opposite — Clinton by a 56.3 percent to 36.6 percent margin.

"The east county is super conservative," said Mike Slater, whose KFMB-AM afternoon talk show centered on Hunter and the indictment last week. It "might as well be Texas or West Virginia. ... Those are people who supported the Hunter family for decades."

Now, armed with the 47-page indictment, Democrats may try to pour campaign money into the district thinking they have a fighting chance.

The indictment shows spending for everyday stuff — there were 45 instances in which the couple spent a total of

\$6,312.81 at Albertsons supermarket and Hagen Food & Pharmacy — as well as ruses aimed at covering up the fact.

'Italy was amazing'

Margaret Hunter spent \$2,569.96 at Barnes & Noble on 22 occasions, including \$85.18 for children's booklets and puzzles that were listed as "booklets for San Diego," the indictment says.

The campaign fund paid \$14,261.33 in 2015 for a family trip to Italy that Margaret Hunter told the treasurer was "mostly military/defense meet related" even though she later emailed a friend to say "Italy was amazing. Truly our best family trip so far. Like that saying 'if traveling was free you'd never see me again.'"

For Democrats, indictment gems like the Italy trip could be campaign gold. But the Hunter name is still a massive advantage. He has proven a huge vote-getter, beating his Democratic challenger by a 27-point margin in 2016. And his challenger this time is a political unknown unlikely to win over conservative voters: Ammar Campa-Najjar, son of a Mexican-American mother and Middle Eastern immigrant father who was a Labor Department spokesman during the Obama administration.

On his weekday radio show, Slater said he hasn't detected as much anger directed to Hunter over the indictment as he has toward the county Republican Party for endorsing the congressman for the primary election. Lack of an endorsement might have paved the way for two Republicans at the top of the ballot for the November contest under California's party-blind primary system.

"People knew this (indictment) was coming, and they still chose to endorse him," Slater, himself a conservative, said in an interview. "What's frustrating is there are so few Republicans in California in office to begin with. We don't need to make it harder on ourselves."

Hunter might have been, "on paper, a phenomenal candidate," but now his troubles have played out long enough leading up to the indictment that the family dynasty could be near an end, said Thad Kousser, a political science professor at the University of California, San Diego.

"There are lots of Republican candidates just waiting for his downfall," Kousser said. "He acted as if this seat were his birthright."

Rancho Ventura — Home of the Two Trees

Three locals share why they love and appreciate Rancho Ventura

As told to Lisa Carey

The all-volunteer Rancho Ventura Trustees have the opportunity to visit and listen to old and new friends share what they love about the Ventura foothills entrusted to Rancho Ventura. "There is not a hike or field trip when someone doesn't pull us aside to share a story or a moment that had Two Trees at Rancho Ventura in it. From the mother who says she remembers looking outside the hospital window at the Two Trees

from the Community Memorial Hospital as she patiently awaited and then delivered her child; to a long-time friend who has hiked every inch of the ranch and now helps take kids out on hikes and happily answers their questions about all they are experiencing for the first time. Every story is precious and valuable. They hold a special place in our memories and hearts. Here's what a few Rancho Ventura supporters shared with us.



Rancho Ventura

NATURE

**Craig Rozar, Naturalist
Ventura, CA**

"This ranch has always been a part of my life. I was 12 years old the first time I stepped foot on the ranch and it has held me captivated ever since. I can navigate every part of that ranch with my eyes closed. The sound of the quail, the dove, where the deer cross, and the lions roam are some of what the land has revealed to me. My father was my north star. As an avid outdoorsman, it easy to see. We must always care for this land."



Michael Kelly

NATURE

**Michael Kelly, World-renowned Artist
Ventura, CA**

"For me it was easy to see. They hold the land entrusted to them sacred. It runs through their veins. They are completely consumed by the land. I have seen it personally. All comes after what the land needs that day. Their needs, their family's wants, even the simple schedule of their day takes a back seat to what needs to be taken care of on the ranch. We drive out back together and Richard tells me of what he's working on, what next must be taken care of. Bonnie chimes in with accounts of the last field tour and the new friends made. What a place they have created for us all."



Rancho Ventura

NATURAL

**Jacqui Irwin, Assemblyperson
44th District — State of California**

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