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Steve Scalise's attendance at 2002 white nationalists event ignites political firestorm

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Steve Scalise

Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, said he didn't know who he was speaking to when he appeared at a white nationalist conference as a speaker 12 years ago. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

U.S. Rep. **Steve Scalise**, R-Jefferson, acknowledged Monday that he **spoke at a white nationalist conference** in Metairie in 2002, but said he did not realize the type of organization he was speaking to and has never affiliated with the group.

News of the speech immediately ignited a political firestorm around Scalise, the Majority

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the U.S. House, just days before the next Congress takes office next week.

The conference was organized by the European-American Unity and Rights Organization, or EURO, an entity founded by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, who spoke via video during the two-day event. Duke was a state House member just years before Scalise also served in the Legislature.

"I didn't know who all of these groups were and I detest any kind of hate group. For anyone to suggest that I was involved with a group like that is insulting and ludicrous," Scalise said Monday in a telephone interview with NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. (**Read the full interview here.**)

"David Duke was never at any group that I spoke to," said Scalise, who added that he didn't recall the EURO conference.

Liberal groups and some Democrats pounced on news about Scalise's attenadance at the event with calls challenging hiss fitness to keep his Congressional leadership post. Republicans, including Gov. Bobby Jindal, issued statements supporting Scalise.

Scalise, who was a state representative in 2002, said he was speaking to groups and giving interviews that year because he was one of very few members of the Legislature opposed to the so-called Stelly state tax plan. With limited staff, Scalise said he wasn't able to vet all groups he spoke to, as he does now. Had he known about EURO's affiliation, the congressman said he wouldn't have accepted the invitation.

"I had one person that was working for me. When someone called and asked me to speak, I would go. I was, in no way, affiliated with that group or other groups I was talking to," he said.

But Duke, in an interview with The Washington Post on Monday, said Scalise was invited to the 2002 conference by two of Duke's longtime associates, Howie Farrell and Kenny Knight. In addition, The Gambit reported about EURO and its connection to Duke two weeks before the event in 2002, indicating it was "scaled down" to be attended only by EURO members and "local organizers."

Scalise "says he didn't realize what the conference was. I don't know if he did or did not," Duke told The Post, adding that Scalise was simply taking an opportunity to meet constituents. Duke told the newspaper he didn't hear Scalise during the times he participated via audio and video conferencing.

Duke served as a state representative from Metairie before he drew national attention in

Edwards in a runoff election for Louisiana governor. Scalise also represented parts of Jefferson Parish in Baton Rouge.

"[Duke] was a state representative before me. Everyone knew who he was. I would not go to any group that he was a part of," Scalise said.

Reports of Scalise's appearance at the conference were first posted on the liberal Louisiana politics website **CenLamar** Sunday (Dec. 28). The site cited comments posted on a white supremacist website by people who attended the event and recalled Scalise's appearance.

In a statement Monday, the Louisiana Republican Party supported Scalise.

"For the 25 years that I've known Congressman Scalise, he has been an aggressive advocate for conservative reform. He has been willing to bring this message to anyone who would listen and has spoken to thousands of groups during his career in public service," said Roger Villere, chairman of the state GOP, in a written statement.

Jindal also stood by Scalise in a statement he released Monday evening.

"I know Congressman Scalise to be a good man who is fair-minded and kindhearted. I'm confident he absolutely rejects racism in all its forms," wrote Jindal.

Scalise also drew support from U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans, the only Democrat in Louisiana's U.S. House delegation.

"I don't think Steve Scalise has a racist bone in his body," Richmond said. "Steve and I have worked on issues that benefit poor people, black people, white people, Jewish people. I know his character."

Richmond suggested the criticisms about Scalise were more about politics than substance.

"I am not going to let them use Steve as a scapegoat to score political points when I know him and know his family," Richmond said.

The Louisiana Democratic Party did not agree with Richmond and called Scalise's appearance at the 2002 event troubling.

"It's even more disturbing to hear that his allies are trying to sweep this incident under the rug by blaming Scalise's staff and claiming the then-state representative didn't know the group's ideology. That's ridiculous," said Stephen Handwerk, executive director of the state Democratic Party, in a written statement.

According to announcements of the 2002

Metairie was a "workshop on civil rights and heritage related activism" for white nationalist groups. It listed Duke as EURO's "national president," indicating he would be speaking via video from another EURO event being held simultaneously in Italy.

One of the participants at the event, posting in the same white nationalist website under the name "Alsace Hebert," wrote about Scalise's appearance.

"The meeting was productive locally as State Representative, Steve Scalise, discussed ways to oversee gross mismanagement of tax revenue or 'slush funds' that have little or no accountability. Representative Scalise brought into sharp focus the dire circumstances

within the Housing and Urban Development Fund, an apparent give-away to a selective group based on race," read the comment, first reported by the CenLamar blog.

The Anti-Defamation League included the 2002 EURO conference in its "**extremists events" watchlist** that year, describing the group as a "white supremacist" organization and noting that Duke was to address attendees.

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CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story incorrectly said Steve Scalise represented the same state House district as David Duke. Scalise represented District 82, Duke represented District 81.

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