

SAVING OUR DEMOCRACY

FROM PAGE 5

You see the breach clearly with Tom DeLay. As he became the king of campaign fundraising, the Associated Press writes, "He began to live a lifestyle his constituents back in Sugar Land would have a hard time ever imagining." Big corporations such as R.J. Reynolds, Phillip Morris, Reliant, El Paso and Dynegy provided private jets to take him to places of luxury most Americans have never seen — places with "dazzling views, warm golden sunsets, golf, goose-down comforters, marble bathrooms and balconies overlooking the ocean." The AP reports that various organizations — campaign committees, political action committees, even a children's charity established by DeLay — paid over \$1 million on hotels, restaurants, golf clubs and resorts (the Ritz Carlton in Jamaica, the Prince Hotel in Hawaii, the Michelangelo in New York, the Phoenician in Scottsdale, the El Conquistador in Puerto Rico, where villas average \$1,300 a night); 100 flights aboard corporate jets arranged by lobbyists; and 500 meals at fancy restaurants, some averaging \$200 for dinner for two. There was even a \$2,896 shopping spree at a boutique on Florida's Amelia Island offering "gourmet cookware, sabbatier cutlery and gadgets for your every need."

DeLay was a man on the move and on the take. But he needed help to sustain the cash flow. He found it in a fellow right wing ideologue named Jack Abramoff. Abramoff personifies the Republican money machine of which DeLay, with the blessing of the House leadership, was the majordomo. It was Abramoff who helped DeLay raise those millions of dollars from campaign donors that brought the support of other politicians and became the base for an empire of corruption. DeLay praised Abramoff as "one of my closest friends." Abramoff in turn told a convention of college Republicans, "Thank God Tom DeLay is majority leader of the House. Tom DeLay is who all of us want to be when we grow up."

Jack Abramoff has pleaded guilty to fraud, tax evasion, and conspiracy to bribe public officials, a spectacular fall for a man whose rise to power began 25 years ago with his election as Chairman of the College Republicans. Despite its innocuous name, the organization became a political attack machine for the Far Right and a launching pad for younger conservatives on the make. "Our job," Abramoff, then 22 years old, wrote after his first visit to the Reagan White House, "is to remove liberals from power permanently (from) student newspaper and radio stations, student governments, and academia." Karl Rove had once held the same job as chairman. So did Grover Norquist, who ran Abramoff's campaign. A youthful \$200-a-month intern named Ralph Reed was at their side. These were the rising young stars of the conservative movement who came to town to lead a revolution and stayed to run a racket.

They reeked piety. Like DeLay, who had proclaimed himself God's messenger, Ralph Reed found Jesus, was born again and wound up running Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, landing on the cover of *Time* as magazine "the Right Hand of God." Reportedly after seeing *Fiddler on the Roof*, Abramoff became an Orthodox religious Jew who finagled fake awards as "Scholar of Biblical & American History," "Distinguished Bible Scholar" (from an apparently nonexistent organization), the "Biblical Mercantile Award" allegedly from the Cascadian Business Institute through which money was funded for DeLay's famous visit to a plush Scottish golf club, and the "National Order of Merit" from the USA Foundation whose chairman was... Jack Abramoff.

It is impossible to treat all the schemes and scams this crowd concocted to subvert democracy in the name of God and greed. But thanks to some superb reporting from The Associated Press and Knight-Ridder, among others, we can touch on a few.

Abramoff made his name, so to speak, representing Indian tribes with gambling interests. As his partner he hired a DeLay crony named Michael Scanlon. Together they would bilk half a dozen Indian tribes who hired them to protect their tribal gambling interests from competition. What they had to offer, of course, was their well-known connections to the Republican power structure, including members of Congress, friends at the White House (Abramoff's personal assistant became Karl Rove's personal assistant), Christian Right activists like Ralph Reed, and rightwing ideologues like Grover Norquist (according to *The Texas Observer*, two lobbying clients of Abramoff paid \$25,000 to Norquist's organization, Americans for Tax Reform, for a lunch date and meeting with President Bush in May 2001). Abramoff and Scanlon came up with one scheme they called "Gimme Five": Abramoff would refer tribes to Scanlon for grassroots public relations work, and Scanlon would then kick back about 50% to Abramoff, all without the tribes' knowledge. Before it was over the tribes had paid them \$82 million, much of it going directly into Abramoff's and Scanlon's pockets. And that doesn't count the thousands more that Abramoff directed the tribes to pay out in campaign contributions.

Some of the money found its way into an outfit called the Council of Republicans for Environment Advocacy (CREA), founded by Gale Norton before she became Interior Secretary, the cabinet position most responsible for Indian gaming rights (as well as oil and gas issues, public lands and parks, and something else we'll get into)."

Some of the money went to so-called charities set up by Abramoff and DeLay that filtered money for lavish trips for members of Congress and their staffs, as well as salaries for Congressional family members and DeLay's pet projects.

And some of the money found its way to the righteous folks of the Christian Right. One who had his hand out was Ralph Reed, the religious right's poster boy against gambling. "We believe gambling is a cancer on the American body politic," Reed had said. "It is stealing food from the mouths of children... (and) turning wives into widows." When he resigned from the Christian Coalition (just as it was coming under federal investigation and slipping into financial arrears), Reed sought a cut of the lucre flowing to Abramoff and Scanlon. He sent Abramoff an e-mail: "Now that I am leaving politics, I need to start humping in corporate accounts... I'm counting on you to help me with some contacts."

Abramoff came through. According to Susan Schmidt and R. Jeffrey Smith, he and Scanlon paid Reed some \$4 million to whip up Christian opposition to gambling initiatives that could cut into the profits of Abramoff's clients. Reed called in some of the brightest stars in the Christian firmament — Pat Robertson, Jerry Fawell, James Dobson, Phyllis Schlafly — to participate in what became a ruse in Abramoff's behalf: They would oppose gambling on religious and moral grounds in strategic places (Texas, Louisiana, Alabama) at decisive moments when competitive challenges threatened Abramoff's clients. Bogus Christian fronts were part of the strategy. Baptist preachers in Texas



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rallied to Reed's appeals. Unsuspecting folks in Louisiana heard the voice of God on radio — with Jerry Fawell and Pat Robertson doing the honors — thundering against a riverboat gambling scheme, which one of Abramoff's clients feared would undermine its advantage. Reed even got James Dobson, whose nationwide radio "ministry" reaches millions of people, to deluge phone lines at the Interior Department and White House with calls from indignant Christians.

In 1999 Abramoff arranged for the Mississippi Choctaws, who were trying to stave off competition from other tribes, to contribute over \$1 million to Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, which then passed the money along to the Alabama Christian Coalition and to another anti-gambling group Reed had duped into aiding the cause. It is unclear how much these Christian soldiers, "marching as to war," knew about the true purpose of their crusade, but Ralph Reed knew all along that his money was coming from Jack Abramoff. The e-mails between the two men read like Elmer Gantry.

It gets worse.

Some of Abramoff's money from lobbying went to start a non-profit organization called the U.S. Family Network. Nice name, yes? An uplifting all-American name, like so many others that fly the conservative banner in Washington. Tom DeLay wrote a fundraising letter in which he described U.S. Family Network as "a powerful nationwide organization dedicated to restoring our government to citizen control." Fundraising appeals warned that the American family "is being attacked from all sides: crime, drugs, pornography... and gambling." So help me, I'm not making this up. You can read R. Jeffrey Smith's mind-boggling account of it on the *Washington Post* website, where he writes that the organization did no discernible grassroots organizing and its money came from business groups with no demonstrated interest in the "moral fitness" agenda that was the U.S. Family Network's professed aim.

Let's call it what it was: a scam — one more cog in the money-laundering machine controlled by DeLay and Abramoff. A former top assistant founded the organization. It bought a townhouse just three blocks from DeLay's Congressional quarters and provided him with fancy free office space where he could go to raise money. DeLay's wife also got a sizable salary. But that's the least of it.

Working with Abramoff through a now-defunct law firm in London and an obscure offshore company in the Bahamas, Russian oil and gas executives were using the U.S. Family Network to funnel money to influence the majority leader of the House of Representatives — yes, that chamber of American government once known as "The People's House."

Our witness for this is the Christian pastor who served as the titular president of the U.S. Family Network, the Reverend Christopher Geeslin. He told *The Washington Post* the founder of the organization, the former DeLay aide, told him that a million dollars was passed through from sources in Russia who wanted DeLay's support for legislation enabling the International Monetary Fund to bail out the faltering Russian economy without demanding the country raise taxes on its energy industry. As Molly Ivins pointed out in a recent column, right on cue, DeLay found his way onto Fox News Sunday to argue the Russian position. That same titular head of the U.S. Family Network, the Christian pastor, said DeLay's former chief of staff also told him, "This is the way things work in Washington."

This is the way things work in Washington.

Twenty-five years ago, Grover Norquist had said that "What Republicans need is 50 Jack Abramoff's in Washington. Then this will be a different town."

Well, they got what they needed, and the arc of the conservative takeover of government has now been completed. As Abramoff had once said his goal was to banish liberals from college campuses, and later that "all my political work is driven by philosophical interests, not by the desire to gain wealth," now his intentions, as he admitted to Michael Crowley of *The New York Times*, were "to push the Republicans on K Street to be more helpful to the conservative movement." Money, politics and ideology became one and the same in a juggernaut of power that crushed everything in sight, including conservative principles.

Here we come to the heart of darkness.

One of Abramoff's first big lobbying clients was the Northern Marianas Islands in the Pacific. After World War 2 the Marianas became a trusteeship of the United Nations, administered by the U.S. Government under the stewardship of the Interior Department. We should all remember that thousands of Marines died there, fighting for our way of life and our freedoms. Today these islands are a haven for tourists — first-class hotels, beautiful beaches, championship golf courses. But there is a dark side. The islands were exempted from U.S. labor and immigration laws, and over the years tens of thousands of people, primarily Chinese, mostly women, were brought there as garment workers. These so-called "guest workers" found themselves living in crowded barracks in miserable conditions. The main island, Saipan, became known as America's biggest sweatshop.

In 1998 a government report found workers there living in substandard conditions, suffering malnutrition and health problems and subjected to unprovoked acts of violence. Many had signed "shadow contracts" which required them to pay up to \$7,000 just to get the job. They also had to renounce their claim to basic human rights, including political and religious activities, socializing and marrying. If they protested, they could be summarily deported. As Greg McDonald wrote in *The Houston Chronicle*, the garments produced on Saipan were manufactured for American companies from tariff-free Asian cloth and shipped duty- and quota-free to the United States. Some of the biggest names in the retail clothing industry — Levi Strauss, The Gap, Eddie Bauer, Reebok, Polo, Tommy Helfiger, Nordstrom's, Lord & Taylor, Jones New York and Liz Claiborne — had been able to slap a "made in the USA" label on the clothes and import them into America, while paying the workers practically nothing.

When these scandalous conditions began to attract attention, the sweatshop moguls fought all efforts at reform. Knowing that Jack Abramoff was close to Tom DeLay, they hired him to lobby for the islands. Conservative members of Congress lined up as Abramoff's team arranged for them to visit the islands on carefully guided junkets. Conservative intellectuals and journalists, for hire at rates considerably above what the women on the islands were making, also signed up for expense-free trips to the Marianas. They flew first-class, dined at posh restaurants, slept in comfort at beachfront hotels, and returned to write and speak of the islands as "a true free market success story" and "a laboratory of liberty."

Abramoff took Tom DeLay and his wife there, too. DeLay practically swooned. He said the Marianas "represented what is best about America." He called them "my Galapagos" — "A perfect petri dish of capitalism."

These fellow travelers — conservative members of Congress, their staffs and their lapdogs in the rightwing press and think tanks — became a solid phalanx against any and all attempts to provide the workers on the islands with a living wage and decent living conditions. For instance, when a liberal California Democrat, George Miller, and a conservative Alaskan Senator, Frank Murkowski, indignant at the "appalling conditions" wanted to enact a bill to raise minimum wages on the islands and at least prevent summary deportation of the workers, DeLay and Abramoff stopped them cold. As Representative Miller told it, "They killed my reform bill year after year. And even when an immigration reform bill by Senator Frank Murkowski, a Republican, was approved by the full Senate, they blocked it repeatedly in the House."

After the 2000 election, when the spoils of victory were being divided up, Abramoff got himself named to the Bush transition team for the Interior Department. He wanted to make sure the right people wound up overseeing his clients, the

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