

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
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NEWS RELEASE

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Government Reform Releases Report on
Jack Abramoff's White House Lobbying

Davis: "The silence speaks volumes..."

Washington, D.C. – The House Government Reform Committee today released a bipartisan investigative report on the nature and extent of the lobbying of White House officials by Jack Abramoff and his associates. As part of its six month investigation, the Committee obtained more than 14,000 pages of billing records and e-mail communications from Abramoff and his associates at Greenberg Traurig L.L.P. related to instances of lobbying White House officials.

The review offered a detailed glimpse into a sordid subculture of fraud and attempted influence peddling. *The Committee was primarily concerned with two questions: To what extent were executive branch officials influenced by Abramoff's elaborate schemes? And, in view of Abramoff's admitted crimes, what reforms would better protect the integrity and increase the transparency of government processes and decisions?*

"It was our job to examine whether and to what extent Jack Abramoff's extravagant claims of influence actually reached their intended targets in the executive branch, and what that might mean about the adequacy of current ethics and lobby disclosure laws," Committee Chairman Tom Davis said. "This is oversight: ask the right questions, get the information, and let the facts speak for themselves about needed reforms."

The Committee's report reveals only scant and circumstantial evidence that Abramoff's encounters and entreaties had a dispositive impact on administration policy or personnel decisions. For example, the records indicate Abramoff and his associates advocated on behalf of more than 20 individuals for administration jobs. One was approved.

Over three years, the lobbying of senior officials appears to be quite limited. There are only nine alleged instances of Abramoff and his team having any kind of contact with Karl Rove, for example. Only one involved a scheduled meeting – less than 50 days into the Administration. The rest occurred at fundraisers or sporting events.

In terms of administration policy and agency decisions over three and half years, Abramoff did take credit for obtaining funding for construction of a jail and school on tribal client lands, political endorsements for insular territorial clients, and the resolution of a border dispute between a tribe and the State of New Mexico.

The lobbyist's former secretary, Susan Ralston, was hired as Karl Rove's executive assistant. Her role in brokering requests to Rove from her former boss raises questions, not answered in Committee documents or the report, about some of her activities. The report reveals Ralston was the most frequently lobbied person of those named – 69 times. Deputy Associate Director of Intergovernmental Affairs Jennifer Farley was next, with 27 instances. [Intergovernmental Affairs is the White House office that deals with tribal issues.]

A number of individuals appear to have been offered tickets to sporting events and concerts. The Committee does not know in all cases if executive branch employees accepted them, if they were allowed to accept them without paying for them, or if they indeed paid for them themselves. The Committee is confident the appropriate authorities will examine whether the tickets were accepted, required to be paid for, and if so, whether they were paid for.

But the Committee found that billing records and e-mails only say so much – that Jack Abramoff billed his clients for these services and expenses, not necessarily that he actually provided or incurred them. Of the 405 instances of lobbying billed, more than half have no meaningful description of the services, and more than 300 refer to unnamed White House officials. 185 of the contacts were over meals or drinks billed to clients, and of these more than half were billed by a single person – Shawn Vassell.

“These records are just one side of what was often a multi-party conversation,” Davis said. “The almost complete absence of reply e-mails from Abramoff's lobbying targets in the White House has to be seen as telling. In an environment that lives and breathes on e-mail exchanges, that silence speaks volumes about how seriously most people in the White House took Jack Abramoff's schemes.

“We will let others construct a circumstantial house of cards and quibble about how many e-mails it takes to consummate a close friendship in Washington. We will let others forever deny the parties the right to say they don't really know each other. That's political theater. That Native American tribes were bilked and that ethics rules may have been violated is dramatic enough.”

The Committee's investigation reveals an enormous gap in current lobbying and financial disclosure requirements. The disclosure forms lack detail and are too infrequent

to give the public, clients, and government officials sufficient timely information on who is lobbying whom, and who is paying for what.

“The lack of specific, real-time disclosure of contacts and expenditures leave unscrupulous lobbyists too much room to ply their corrupting craft,” Davis said. “To bring greater transparency to meetings between the private sector and executive branch officials, our Committee approved provisions in H.R. 5112 to require all political appointees and senior officials in federal agencies and the White House to report contacts with private parties seeking to influence official government action. We will be looking at other proposals to make disclosures of activities on both sides of lobbying transactions more complete and timely. Given the depths of Abramoff’s fraud and the importance of protecting the integrity of governmental processes, senior government officials may need to report on a regular basis on who is lobbying them and whether they are accepting and/or paying for meals and entertainment provided by lobbyists.”

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