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Lobbyist Had Close Contact With Bush Team

By SHARON THEIMER, Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON - In [President Bush](#)'s first year in the White House, the administration had roughly 200 contacts with Republican fundraiser Jack Abramoff and his lobbying team as they sought influence Bush's hires and pressed him to keep the Northern Mariana Islands free from the minimum wage law, documents show.

The reception Abramoff's team received from the administration contrasts with chilly relations during the Clinton years. Abramoff, then at the Preston Gates law firm, scored few meetings with Clinton aides as the lobbyist and the islands vehemently opposed White House attempts to extend U.S. labor laws to the territory's clothing factories.

"Our standing with the new administration promises to be solid and several friends of the CNMI (islands) will soon be taking high-ranking positions in the Administration, including within the Interior Department," Abramoff wrote in a January 2001 letter in which he persuaded the island government to follow him as a client to his new lobbying firm, Greenberg Traurig.

The meetings between Abramoff's lobbying team and the new Bush administration included Attorney General [John Ashcroft](#) and policy advisers in Vice President [Dick Cheney](#)'s office, according to his lobbying firm billing records.

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Abramoff, a \$100,000-plus fundraiser for Bush, is now under criminal investigation for some of his lobbying work.

His firm boasted that its lobbying team helped revise a section of the Republican Party's 2000 platform to make it favorable to its island client.

In addition, two of Abramoff's lobbying colleagues on the Marianas won political appointments to federal agencies: Patrick Pizzella, named an assistant secretary of labor by Bush, and David Safavian, chosen by Bush to oversee federal procurement policy at the Office of Management and Budget.

"We have worked with the White House Office of Presidential Personnel to ensure that CNMI-relevant positions at various agencies are not awarded to enemies of CNMI," Abramoff's team wrote to the Marianas in an October 2001 report on its work for the year.

The records from Abramoff's firm, obtained by The Associated Press from the Marianas under an open records request, chronicle Abramoff's cultivation of relations with Bush's political team as far back as 1997.

In that year, Abramoff charged the Marianas for getting then-Texas Gov. Bush to write a letter expressing support for the Pacific territory's school choice proposal, his billing records show.

"I hope you will keep my office informed on the progress of this initiative," Bush wrote in a July 18, 1997, letter praising the island school plan and copying in an Abramoff deputy.

White House spokeswoman Erin Healy said Thursday that Bush didn't consider Abramoff a friend. "They may have met on occasion, but the president does not know him," she said.

As for the number of Abramoff lobbying team contacts with Bush officials documented in the billing records, Healy said: "We do not know how he defines 'contacts.'"

Andrew Blum, a spokesman for Abramoff, declined comment.

The Greenberg Traurig firm, where Abramoff worked between late 2000 and early 2004, is investigating Abramoff's work and cooperating with government investigations.

"Greenberg Traurig accepted Jack Abramoff's resignation from the firm, effective March 2, 2004, after Mr. Abramoff disclosed to the firm personal transactions and related conduct which are

unacceptable to the firm and antithetical to the way we do business," spokeswoman Jill Perry said.

Abramoff is under federal investigation amid allegations he overcharged tribal clients by millions of dollars, and his ties to powerful lawmakers such as House Majority Leader Tom DeLay R-Texas, are under increasing scrutiny.

The documents show his team had extensive access to Bush administration officials, meeting with Cheney policy advisers Roy Christie and Stephen Ruhlén, Ashcroft at the [Justice Department](#), White House intergovernmental affairs chief Ruben Barrales, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, Deputy Interior Secretary Steven Griles and others.

Most of the contacts were handled by Abramoff's subordinates, who then reported back to him on the meetings. Abramoff met several times personally with top Interior officials, whose Office of Insular Affairs oversees the Mariana Islands and other U.S. territories.

In all, the records show at least 195 contacts between Abramoff's Marianas lobbying team and the Bush administration from February through November 2001.

Abramoff's team didn't neglect party politics either: There were at least two meetings with [Republican National Committee](#) officials, including then-finance chief Jack Oliver, as well as attendance at GOP fundraisers.

The records obtained by AP provide a detailed accounting of deals and dealings between Abramoff and his team and government officials and talk in raw terms about the lobbyist's campaign to convince Congress the U.S. territory was not home to sweatshops.

When Clinton was in office and his administration was targeting alleged "sweatshops" on the islands, Abramoff, then leading Preston Gates' Marianas team, considered trying to shut down the Office of Insular Affairs, a key source of criticism of working conditions in the territory's garment industry.

Abramoff and his Preston Gates team ultimately abandoned that plan, telling the Marianas government it would yield too many negative news stories and that, "if the department is wiped out, the Administration is free to carry on those activities in another branch."

"The CNMI has many needs and, thanks to the past trips, many

friends on the Appropriations Committees in the Congress. Of urgent focus this year will be the effort either to defund, or more likely, to severely limit the activities of the Office of Insular Affairs; the firm wrote to the island government in a lobbying plan in February 1998.

Meanwhile, Abramoff and his team were working to get close to top Republicans and Democrats. By Bush's 2000 presidential race they were connected enough to boast of obtaining early drafts of the platforms each party adopted at its presidential convention.

"In the case of the Republican platform, the team reviewed and commented on sections dealing with insular territories to ensure appropriately positive treatment. This was successful," the Prest Gates firm wrote to Marianas.

"In the case of the Democratic Party platform, the team assisted drafting early versions of neutral language relating to the territories," the firm wrote. "However, heavy intervention by the White House eventually deleted positive references to the CNMI

The access of Abramoff and his team to the administration came as the lobbyist was establishing himself as a GOP fundraiser.

Abramoff and his wife each gave \$5,000 to Bush's 2000 recount fund and the maximum \$1,000 to his 2000 campaign. By mid-2003, Abramoff had raised at least \$100,000 for Bush's re-election campaign, becoming one of Bush's famed "pioneers."

Money also flowed from the Marianas to Bush's re-election campaign: It took in at least \$36,000 from island donors, much of it from members of the Tan family, whose clothing factories were a routine stop for lawmakers and their aides visiting the islands on Abramoff-organized trips.

Two Tan family companies gave \$25,000 each to the National Republican Senatorial Committee for the 2002 elections. Greenberg Traurig, too, was a big GOP giver. Its donations included \$20,000 to the Republican National Committee for the 2000 elections and \$25,000 each to the GOP's House and Senate fundraising committees in 2000 and again in 2002.

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AP Photo: Jack Abramoff, right, listens to his attorney Abbe Lowell on Capitol Hill in this Sept....

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