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## Jack Abramoff

### The friend Tom DeLay can't shake.

By James Harding

Posted Thursday, April 7, 2005, at 3:36 PM PT



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Where to begin examining the extraordinary career of Jack Abramoff? His work trying to secure a visa for the great Zairian kleptocrat Mobutu Sese Seko, perhaps, or the bilking of an estimated \$66 million out of Native American tribes, clients he described as "monkeys," "troglodytes," and "idiots"? Or his leadership of a 1980s think tank financed, unbeknownst to him apparently, by the intelligence arm of South Africa's apartheid regime?

No, the chapter of our man's story that matters most at the moment begins with a toast given by House Majority Leader Tom DeLay during a New Year's trip they both took to Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands in 1997. "When one of my closest and dearest friends, Jack Abramoff, your most able representative in Washington, D.C., invited me to the islands, I wanted to see firsthand the free-market success and the progress and reform you have made," DeLay said before an audience of Abramoff's clients in the islands' garment industry—whom, upon his return to Washington, he helped win an extended exemption from federal immigration and labor laws.

The most salient fact about Abramoff these days is that he may prove DeLay's undoing. The House majority leader has so far commanded

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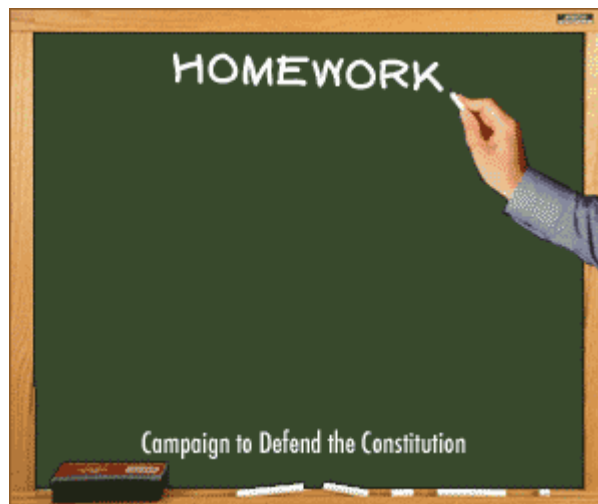
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extraordinary, tight-lipped loyalty from the Republican ranks in Congress in the face of scandals detailed [here](#). But precedent is not on his side. Newt Gingrich's political demise was a slow death by a thousand cuts. Today there is already plenty of speculation in Washington that the White House is wavering about DeLay: As much as the president prizes loyalty, he is intolerant of sleaze and impatient with damaging distractions from his agenda. "Within six months, Karl will force him out," a senior administration official from the first term says, speaking, of course, of Karl Rove. At least one conservative redoubt, the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page, has already thrown open the door. Mr. DeLay has "an unsavory whiff that could have GOP loyalists reaching for the political Glade if it gets any worse," the paper wrote last week.

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That whiff can be traced to the pungent Jack Abramoff. As a high-school student in Beverly Hills, Calif., Abramoff was a square-jawed, broad-shouldered weightlifting champion.\* He went to college at Brandeis and to law school at Georgetown. Like Rove and Lee Atwater before him, it was in his college days that he first garnered attention. He became chairman of the College Republicans in 1981. Even then, Abramoff was a fragrant figure: While running the College Republicans, he also chaired the USA Foundation, a group that enjoyed tax-exempt status because it purported to be nonpartisan. In October 1984, the USA Foundation staged anniversary celebrations marking the first anniversary of Reagan's invasion of Grenada—jamborees that the group insisted



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had nothing to do with Reagan's re-election campaign. A spokesman explained Abramoff's dual role to Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post*: "When he has his College Republican hat on, he's partisan. When he has his U.S.A. hat on, he's nonpartisan."

After a stint in the movie business as president of Regency Entertainment Group (most notable for the making of the Commie-bashing Dolph Lundgren flick *Red Scorpion*), Abramoff went on to become a major Washington *macher*. He signed up as a lobbyist in 1994, catching the Gingrich wave. He started at Preston Gates Ellis & Rouvelas Meeds, which boasted of his connections to the Hill's conservative leadership. Later Greenberg Traurig poached him, let him loose to trawl for millions, and then, after his troubles began to unfold, let him go.

Abramoff's defining innovation on K Street—the Avenue of the Lobbyists—has been to wear his political and business hats at the same time. He is an operator and also an ideologue. Take, for example, his success in getting part of the fortune he siphoned off the Indian gambling interests into conservative coffers. This is how the game worked: Abramoff's biggest client was the Coushatta Nation of Louisiana. The deal he delivered for the tribe was congressional support for tax exemptions and opposition to efforts by other tribes to set up rival casinos. In return, Abramoff got an estimated \$32 million, a chunk of the \$66 million he made all together from Indian gaming clients. The money was paid in lobbying fees and contributions to Abramoff-selected charitable organizations and nonprofit groups with strong Republican ties. For example, Abramoff helped get the chief of the Coushatta invited to a meeting with President George W. Bush in early 2001, set up by Grover Norquist, once Abramoff's executive director at the College Republicans and now Washington's pre-eminent conservative lobbyist. It was suggested that a donation to Norquist's think tank, Americans for Tax Reform, might be appreciated. Abramoff pressed the Coushattas. The \$25,000 check was sent to ATR.

Now this and much more is fodder for reporters. The details of the Coushatta payment to Americans for Tax Reform was reported in the

*Texas Observer* and the *Lake Charles American Press*. The Knight Ridder and Gannett papers have been falling over each other to trace the huge donations made to the Capital Athletic Foundation, a charity set up by Abramoff, and to Eshkol Academy, the Jewish prep school he and his wife established in Maryland. (When I met Abramoff two years ago for lunch—a second sitting at Signatures, a restaurant that he owns on Pennsylvania Avenue—he did not want to reveal much about his clients, but he waxed on proudly about Eshkol.) The *Washington Post* has delivered a drip-feed of stories about the arrangements Abramoff made for DeLay to play golf in Scotland, visit South Korea, and meet Russian oil tycoons in Moscow. (Congressmen are, of course, allowed to play golf and travel abroad, but not when their expenses are paid by lobbyists or foreign groups.)

Neck and neck with the journalists are federal investigators. The Justice Department and the Interior Department are looking into Abramoff's use of charitable foundations as businesses and nonprofit political groups as conduits for foreign money. The Senate Finance Committee is also investigating Abramoff's use of tax-exempt entities; the Senate Indian Affairs Committee is questioning his treatment of the tribes. The latter, which is chaired by Arizona Sen. John McCain, released a slew of e-mails written by Abramoff that offered a glimpse into the disdain in which he seems to hold the clients he pickpockets. "I think the key thing to remember with all these clients is that they are annoying, but that the annoying losers are the only ones which have this kind of money and part with it so quickly," he wrote in an e-mail to Michael Scanlon, his partner in working the tribes and a former aide to DeLay.

Abramoff is an orthodox Jew and DeLay is a committed Christian; their relationship is rooted in their parallel faiths. They were introduced more than a decade ago by Rabbi Daniel Lapin, the South African-born radio talk-show host who established Toward Tradition, a nonprofit coalition of Jews and Christians that aims to advance the agenda of the devout. Since Abramoff's troubles began, he and DeLay have sought to distance themselves from the other. But DeLay can't shake Abramoff loose so easily—not after their trips abroad, the major role Abramoff played in DeLay's

well-financed and successful run for whip, the public praise DeLay heaped on Abramoff for helping bring Native Americans into the Republican fold. Abramoff has hired a number of ex-DeLay staffers, worked closely with the congressman on trade issues, and was partly responsible for DeLay's trips to Britain and Russia. And he has contributed tens of thousands of dollars to DeLay's various political organizations. Given the unfolding details of Abramoff's extraordinary three-ring circus of lobbying, political fund-raising, and supposed nonprofit work, the danger for the House majority leader is that the Abramoff story has only just begun to come out.

As for Abramoff, he is now the needy client. Andrew Blum, a spokesman for Abbe Lowell of Chadbourne & Parke, a law firm that Abramoff now employs, argues that some of Abramoff's clients did not know he had a relationship with DeLay. That's a long way from the toast in Saipan.

***Correction, May 4:*** *The original sentence incorrectly said that Abramoff went to high school in Margate, N.J. Abramoff lived in Margate as a child but attended high school in Beverly Hills, Calif. ([Return to the corrected sentence.](#))*

*James Harding is Washington bureau chief of the Financial Times.*

*Photograph of Jack Abramoff by Tom Williams/Roll Call Photos.*

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