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Abramoff: Well-Connected to the Well-Heeled of the Right

Penn Ave. lobbyist's strong ties to right initiatives is proof that the strongest ties aren't the most visible

By Rick Cohen

The cross fertilization of two-stepping politicians and questionable philanthropy is a daily phenomenon, but it takes a little digging to follow the relationships. One worth examining is the nonprofit and philanthropic work of Washington, D.C., lobbyist Jack Abramoff, a longtime associate of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

Abramoff has long been the epicenter of critical attention for his distinctive ability to attract lobbying fees from Indian tribes, amounting to more than \$45 million over three years to Abramoff and his associate, Mike Scanlon, another DeLay intimate. Not surprisingly, the tribes' hiring of Abramoff resulted in a huge shift of their political contributions to the Republican Party and Republican candidates. Abramoff's success and the consequent unhappiness of many tribal members garnered the uber-lobbyist a hearing on Sept. 29 in front of Sen. John McCain's Indian Affairs Committee to face charges that he swindled the tribes and misused their contributions.

What elevates this from simply another sordid story of sleazy politics is Abramoff's role with nonprofits. The *Washington Post's* front-page September 28 story revealed that the nonprofit Capital Athletic Foundation, located in the District of Columbia, had collected almost \$6 million ostensibly for "needy and deserving" sportsmanship programs, but spent only 1 percent of its revenues toward sports-related programs for youths. The other 99 percent of CAF expenditures went to items such as a memorial dinner for Angolan rebel Jonas Savimbi and a golf trip to St. Andrews, Scotland, on a private jet for lobbyists and lawmakers such as the Christian Coalition's Ralph Reed and House Administration Committee Chairman Robert Ney (R-Ohio).

The connection? The Capital Athletic Foundation (CAF) is run by Jack Abramoff and is co-located in Abramoff's office, and its expenditures include buying a house in Silver



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Spring, Md., titled in the name of a company directed by Abramoff, and grants of some \$4 million (between 2001 and 2003) to the Eshkol Academy in Columbia, Md., where Abramoff sent his kids for schooling (before the school went bankrupt this past

spring). The *Post* cited e-mails from Abramoff describing the Eshkol school as a "front group," though it isn't clear for what. With the CAF donations, Eshkol bought two Zamboni ice-cleaning machines, though the school lacked a hockey rink.

The CAF Web site (<http://www.capathletic.org/>) lists programs such as the "Spirit of America" awards and the National Sportsmanship Hall of Fame and grants to 16 schools and Scout troops, generally recipients of CAF's typical \$500 grants, but not the Eshkol Academy or Kollel Ohel Tiferet in Israel (\$97,500 from CAF in 2002 alone) or PTACH, a Jewish children's services agency in Brooklyn (\$300,000 in 2002). With no trace on the website about the conservative Jewish and Israeli grants, it may come as a surprise that Abramoff has been a longtime pro-Israel lobbyist.

You need Sherlock Holmes to connect all the dots in the Abramoff case. The Christian Coalition connection? Abramoff and his partners got some \$4 million from the Tigua tribe in Texas to keep its casino open while Abramoff and Scanlon simultaneously worked with former Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed, now a high functionary in the Bush re-election campaign, to block the Tigua casino and several others in the South, paying Reed just about \$4 million to do so.

Abramoff's perfidy toward his Indian clients is all too clear in an e-mail he sent Reed in 2002: "I wish those moronic Tiguas were smarter in their political contributions. I'd love us to get our mitts on that moolah!! Oh well, stupid folks get wiped out." One might have guessed that the Tiguas would have testified at the Indian Affairs Committee hearing.

Then there's the connection to NCRP's research on conservative foundations and conservative think tanks. Abramoff is on the board of Toward Tradition, a 501(c)(3) devoted to promoting "traditional Judeo-Christian values," including the "faith-based American principles of constitutional and limited government, ... free markets, a strong military, and a moral public culture." Toward Tradition's founder and president, Rabbi Daniel Lapin, got more than \$60,000 as a consultant in 2002 from the Capital Athletic Foundation. Abramoff is a director of the National Security Caucus Foundation, the educational arm of the Congressional National Security Caucus, a pro-defense nonprofit.

Abramoff is also the former executive director of Citizens for America (CFA), a "grassroots lobbying organization" founded in 1983 by conservative activists such as Lewis Lehrman and Jack Hume to promote President Reagan's "pet projects" such as the "Star Wars" Strategic Defense Initiative and support for the "contras" in Nicaragua. One of CFA's initiatives (as well as an initiative of the Conservative Caucus, whose PAC Abramoff also directed at one time) was in 1986 to give Jonas Savimbi "freedom fighter" status to make him eligible for U.S. government aid. Almost two decades later, Abramoff uses his sports philanthropy to memorialize the right wing Angolan rebel. His connection to African politics goes back to his co-founding of the International Freedom Foundation, which lobbied against Nelson Mandela and in favor of the apartheid regime.

You'll currently find Abramoff serving as a director of the National Center for Public Policy Research (NCPPr), which is funded by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Carthage Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, the Earhart Foundation, and the Sarah Scaife Foundation, among others, all getting mentions in NCRP's *Axis of Ideology* study of the public policy grantmaking of conservative foundations. Abramoff and NCPPr's executive director, Amy Moritz Ridenour, go back decades to when he was chair and she was deputy direc-

tor of the College Republican National Committee. NCPPr is notable for at least two major initiatives, its Project 21 affiliate promoting black conservatives and its Envirotruth Web site attacking the so-called "jihad" of environmental activists against corporations. NCPPr's strong support for deregulation and free market principles matches Abramoff's lobbying successes, which include helping—with his friend Tom DeLay—the Marianas Islands fight against minimum wage and other labor protections for sweatshop workers.

The connection to Sen. Bill Frist's Republican National Convention fundraiser? One of the large donors to Frist's charitable endeavor was Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers Association of America (PhRMA), an industry trade association. PhRMA has made an "unrestricted educational grant" to the United Seniors Association (USA), a conservative grassroots organization for the elderly, and USA has in turn run issue ads on TV supporting President Bush's Medicare prescription drug plan (which would prevent Medicare from negotiating with the drug companies to get deep price discounts on prescription drugs), and then aired ads thanking legislators who voted for the president's plan—in all, it ran nearly \$10 million in advertising. USA also ran issue ads in 2001 and 2002 costing over \$2 million that advocated for the Bush administration's \$1.3 trillion tax cut. No surprise, but Jack Abramoff—a "Pioneer" fundraiser for the 2004 Bush-Cheney campaign—is on the board of the United Seniors Association. ○

Rick Cohen is executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP). NCRP is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1976 by nonprofit leaders across the nation who recognized that traditional philanthropy was falling short of addressing critical public needs. NCRP's founders encouraged foundations to provide resources and opportunities to help equalize the uneven playing field that decades of economic equality and pervasive discrimination had created. Today NCRP conducts research on and advocates for philanthropic policies and practices that are responsive to public needs. For more information on NCRP or to join, please visit www.ncrp.org, call (202) 387-9177 or use the enclosed membership form.

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