



## Combating the Culture of Corruption

Student Handout #3: **Roll Call, “McCain Won’t Target Members”**

By Paul Kane  
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Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has assured his colleagues that his expanding investigation into the activities of a former GOP lobbyist and a half-dozen of his tribal casino clients is not directed at revealing ethically questionable actions by Members of Congress.

At a Senate Republican luncheon last Wednesday, McCain told the gathering that his own probe, being run through the Indian Affairs Committee, is simply looking into potential "fraudulent" activities perpetrated against the tribes by Jack Abramoff and his associates.

"It's not our responsibility in any way to involve ourselves in the ethics process [of Senators]," McCain said Wednesday, explaining the comments he made to his fellow GOP Senators. "That was not the responsibility of the Indian Affairs Committee."

McCain's comments to Republicans, made at the weekly lunch of the GOP's Steering Committee, came on the same day a trio of stories landed in Washington newspapers raising questions about the legislative actions taken by two GOP Senators and political donations to an interest group established in 1997 by Interior Secretary Gale Norton.

Because of those stories - and several other news reports touching on Abramoff's relationship with Members - McCain said he wanted to let Senators know that he was not trying to air any of their dirty laundry.

"There were all kinds of rumors that were flying," he said. None of the stories were sourced to the committee and McCain said he played no role in them.

His investigation, in which a new round of hearings are expected later this spring, would continue to instead center on "where Indian tribes were defrauded," and focus specifically on the \$82 million that Abramoff and his public relations associate, Mike Scanlon, charged to six tribes over a three-year period, McCain said.

His disclaimer came as two Senators involved in the latest round of Abramoff stories, Conrad Burns (R-Mont.) and David Vitter (R-La.), said they welcomed any investigation and promised to help McCain in any way.

"I want to assure you and the committee full cooperation of my personal office in the committee's investigative efforts," Burns wrote to McCain last week.

As Roll Call and reported last Wednesday, Burns and his political committees received at least \$134,000 in contributions from Abramoff and his tribal clients in 2001 and 2002, during which he had hired a former aide from Abramoff's firm to a top Senate position. The Washington Post reported that Abramoff later hired another of Burns' top aides. The Post also reported that Burns, chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on the Interior, with spending oversight of tribal issues, helped send \$3 million for a school project to one of Abramoff's tribal clients in Michigan.

On Wednesday, Burns said he has instructed his staff to start an internal review of all actions that the Senator and his office conducted related to Abramoff or any of his associates at the lobbyist's former firm, Greenberg Traurig, which pushed Abramoff out a year ago as the controversy first came to light. "We are going through our records to see what happened," Burns said, noting that McCain's assurances weren't necessary.

"It doesn't make any difference. Whatever they want out of our office, whatever they need, I'm willing to do that," he added.

As Roll Call reported last week, Vitter, while a House Member, pushed a provision in an Appropriations bill that was designed to instruct the Interior Department to deny federal recognition to a tribe seeking to build a casino in western Louisiana. An opponent of gambling, Vitter worked hand-in-hand with a group opposed to the proposed tribal casino - a group that was later revealed to be funded by a competing Indian casino that simply didn't want increased competition to its multi-million-dollar gambling operation.

Vitter, who has said he did not know the anti-gambling group was a front for another casino, said Wednesday that McCain personally approached him last week to assure him that his committee is not angling to embarrass fellow Senators. But, Vitter said, he has nothing to hide and believes McCain's probe is highlighting the unseemly connection between Indian casino money and attempts to expand tribal gambling.

"I encouraged him to keep going full speed ahead," Vitter said.

A senior McCain aide said a Member could end up in the committee's cross-hairs only if the Member was involved in defrauding the tribes.

In addition to McCain's Indian Affairs probe, a federal grand jury is examining Abramoff and the interlocking web of financial interests he and Scanlon established or funded, an investigation involving the Justice Department as well as the Internal Revenue Service and the Interior Department.

While the grand jury investigation has been cloaked in secrecy, Indian Affairs has already had two high-profile hearings on the matter, hauling Abramoff and Scanlon

before the panel and forcing them to invoke their Fifth Amendment right against self incrimination.

The panel's hearings revealed that Scanlon billed the tribes for at least \$66 million in public relations fees, about \$42 million of which was pure profit that was split down the middle between Scanlon and Abramoff. Most of Abramoff's profit was steered to a variety of business groups and nonprofits he formed, although in one instance Scanlon's PR firm wrote out a single check worth more than \$4 million, made payable to Abramoff personally.

McCain said Wednesday that his committee continues to examine all the financial angles of where the \$82 million ended up, as well as other political and charitable contributions the tribes made at Abramoff's request. But he reiterated that he was following the money trail, not the legislative actions taken by Members of Congress. "We stop when we find out where the money went," he said.

At one of the public hearings, however, then-Indian Affairs Chairman and ex-Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-Colo.) and McCain aired a highly embarrassing incident involving House Administration Chairman Bob Ney (R-Ohio), who, as has been widely reported, took costly trips with Abramoff to Scotland to play the legendary St. Andrews golf course. Abramoff pushed Ney to insert language into an election reform bill he oversaw that would have shut down a tribal casino viewed as a rival to another of Abramoff's clients, and in addition the lobbyist's clients gave Abramoff \$32,000 in contributions.

McCain stressed Wednesday that he wasn't pursuing that angle in the investigation, saying it was something that merely came up in process of talking to the tribal victim. "I didn't pursue that, they stated that in testimony," he said, adding, "We didn't pursue that any further."

Ney, however, may have to appear before the House ethics committee to explain his actions. In addition, a report in Wednesday's Los Angeles Times said that the nonprofit group the National Center for Public Policy Research, for which Abramoff used to be a board member, denied paying for the trip to Scotland, making it highly likely Abramoff paid for the trip himself.

Registered lobbyists are not permitted to pay for such trips. Ney denied knowing that Abramoff may have personally paid for the trip, and said he welcomed the chance to talk to the ethics committee to clear the air.

Source: *Roll Call*, retrieved through Nexis, February 15, 2008.