

## To Russia, Love Tom DeLay

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**Once in a very long time, a scandal comes** along that seems to capture the essence of our times. I'd say that scandal appeared on Saturday, when most of us were too busy getting out the honkers and the booze to notice.

Here's the crux: Was the Republican leader Tom DeLay working on behalf of Russians against the American public interest—and being compensated for it?

That's a pretty strong accusation, but unless I read my *Washington Post* wrong, that is exactly what was alleged in a front page story that appeared on Saturday, the last day of 2005, and therefore may escape proper notice. The article is even easier to miss because of the mundane "more of the same" headline above it: "[The DeLay-Abramoff Money Trail](#) : Nonprofit Group Linked to Lawmaker Was Funded Mostly by Clients of Lobbyist."

First, some background. Tuesday, as the world knows by now, Jack Abramoff, the powerful Republican lobbyist and major DeLay associate, pleaded guilty to conspiracy, fraud and tax evasion charges, agreeing to cooperate in a federal corruption probe in Washington. He faces up to 11 years in federal prison and must pay \$26.7 million in restitution.

For many months, we've been hearing stories about Abramoff's shakedowns and indiscreet e-mails mocking Indian tribal leaders and other outrages, many of them with DeLay at the periphery or more directly involved.

The problem with these stories—which range from machinations over gambling licenses and Pacific island sweatshops to golfing junkets in Scotland—is that they are complicated, seemingly obscure and center on figures like Abramoff, who, while important, is merely an enabler of a larger and more troubling reality: How Republicans inside and outside of the Congress are subverting democracy itself, with public funds going to advance the personal interests of a small set of powerful Americans.

The figures that really matter in this story are bigger fish—among them DeLay, the architect and de facto leader of the corporate takeover of Congress under cover of a social revolution.

That's why the *Post* story should be one of the biggest stories of the new year, even if it got lost on the last day of the old one. It needed to be published on another day, and it needed to be told differently. So, here's a stab at capturing what I see as most important about it.

Cumulatively, a careful reader comes away with the following conclusion: DeLay was essentially being bribed by Russians. Specifically, a phony nonprofit set up by DeLay's former top aide was used to transfer monies from powerful Russians to DeLay, in return for his influencing legislation that could direct U.S. taxpayer money into their pockets. The Russians, working through super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff, put up most of the \$2.5 million "contributions" that funneled through the outfit.

DeLay got free international trips and fancy free office space in a secret townhouse, and his wife got paid a sizable monthly salary for doing nothing. Meantime, the nonprofit presented itself to the public as devoted to promoting family values, and ran ads attacking

Democrats.

Monies were passed from Russian oil and gas executives working with Abramoff through a now-defunct London law firm and an obscure Bahamian company into an outfit, set up by former DeLay Chief of Staff Ed Buckham, masquerading as a grassroots advocacy group on family values. The group, the U.S. Family Network, existed for five years, but apparently did little or nothing on family issues, though it actually had the temerity to send out fundraising letters to the public, warning that “the American family is under attack from all sides: crime, drugs, pornography, and... gambling.” It also paid for ads attacking vulnerable Democratic candidates.

But what it was really doing, according to the article, was influencing DeLay to support legislation favorable to wealthy Russians—with the bill paid for by American taxpayers. DeLay traveled to Moscow in 1997 and spent time with the Russians, though he claimed to the House clerk that another nonprofit paid for it and that he was in that country to “meet with religious leaders there.”

Probably the most incendiary material in the *Post* story was buried, beginning in paragraph 32. The former president of the U.S. Family Network, a pastor no less, actually says that Buckham explained to him in 1999 that a \$1 million payment passed through to the organization was intended specifically to influence DeLay's 1998 vote on a bill that enabled the International Monetary Fund to use U.S. taxpayer monies, in part, to bail out the Russian economy and specific wealthy Russian investors involved with the scheme.

"Ed told me, 'This is the way things work in Washington,' " [Pastor Christopher] Geeslin said. "He said the Russians wanted to give the money first in cash." Buckham, he said, orchestrated all the group's fundraising and spending and rarely informed the board about the details.

Tom DeLay and his cronies appear to have been accepting what amounted to bribes from Russians with connections to the Yeltsin-Putin regimes who wanted U.S. taxpayer monies to keep flowing to benefit them. They laundered the money, and, worse, did it through a nonprofit organization, which, in turn, claimed to be established to fight the decline in moral standards in America. Even more appalling, while this phony charity was doing this mercenary work, it was hitting up naïve members of DeLay's political base for contributions.

The fine print is equally tawdry. Mrs. DeLay's salary of “at least \$3,200 each month for three of the years the group existed” (that's a total of at least \$115,200) was supposedly in compensation for supplying Buckham with a list of "lawmakers' favorite charities." The *Post* mentions this only briefly, and with a straight face. But the transparent ridiculousness of this on so many levels offers a bounty for journalists who pursue it.

How better to capture the brazen hypocrisy of all this than through tabloid-style headlines:

- Revenue from the phony ‘family’ charity was used to finance radio ads attacking vulnerable Democratic lawmakers. So, let's see: "Putin Buddies Paid For Attacks On Dems"
- Other funds went to finance the cash purchase of a townhouse near DeLay's congressional office. DeLay's guys called it “the Safe House.” So, maybe this headline: “Russian Cash Bought DeLay Safe House”
- The point man for this, DeLay's former aide Buckham, had been executive director of the Republican Study Committee, a group of ‘fiscally conservative’ House members. Headline: “Fiscal Conservatives Give U.S. Money To Rich Russians”

The Russian angle is especially important, as recent developments show a growing clampdown by Putin on democracy in Russia—from arrests of political opponents to curtailment of the press—along with blatant attempts to intimidate former Soviet republics like Ukraine. This puts the so-called freedom-loving GOP leadership in bed with the least savory of the holdover Communists.

There will be many developments in the weeks ahead, now that Abramoff has cut a deal with the feds. When he begins his promised cooperation with the prosecution, he may have things to say about many other matters, including the U.S. Family Network.

But it's important in these overwhelming times to stay focused. Ultimately, these cases are not about Jack Abramoff, a fellow most of us never even heard of until fairly recently. They are about what has happened to this country. Put simply, the American people were

taken to the cleaners by a group of charlatans in the guise of faith healers who didn't even believe in their own product.

I doubt *The Washington Post* would give front page play to such a story—or have assigned a reporter with experience covering national security—if this was not the big one.

Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce you to RussiaGate?