

LOBBYING SWINDLERS AND FIXERS

the big idea

Swindlers and Fixers

Which kind of Washington lobbyist is worse?

By Jacob Weisberg

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There are vastly more lobbyists in Washington than ever before, but understanding them remains relatively simple. There are two basic types: the swindlers and the fixers.

The swindler is represented by Jack Abramoff, who got Indian tribes to pay him millions of dollars to help legalize casinos on their reservations, and then pay him more millions to protect them from potential competitors who, as it happens, were also paying Abramoff millions to legalize *their* gambling operations. That Abramoff, an Orthodox Jew, had the bright idea of enlisting fundamentalist Christians to assist his Indians gives the scandal a delightful *Blazing Saddles* quality.

In Washington, the swindler's native habitat is the golf course and the stadium skybox, where he woos his clients and refreshes his relationships to people with power. A carnivore, he lives on a diet of steak, cabernet sauvignon, and cheesecake, served in excessive portions in the brass-and-leather "power" restaurant that he owns or is at least a partner in. The swindler spends a great deal of time prowling fundraisers and receptions in order to be seen and photographed with his arm around elected officials. He cultivates a naughty image and does not mind being criticized in the press for being an "influence peddler," which only proves that he has influence to peddle. Short of a criminal investigation, infamy is free advertising.

The swindler lobbyist's natural prey is the naive but cynical client—the African dictator, the Russian oligarch, or the casino Indian, who thinks the game in Washington is rigged and that he must pay someone like Abramoff to play and win it. Such clients take the swindler's boasts about his connections and his ability to make things happen at face value. They don't ask questions when he suggests, for instance, that the way to keep the Mariana Islands exempt from labor laws is to give half a million dollars to something called the U.S. Family Network or to contribute to a think-tank that underwrites golf junkets. The swindler may or may not do anything that actually helps his clueless clients, who don't understand the true value of having something inserted in the *Congressional Record*: precisely nil.

The lobbyist-as-fixer is epitomized by the late gray eminence Clark Clifford, who served several presidents beginning with Harry Truman, and "advised" corporations on how to get what they wanted from the government, before being brought low by the BCCI banking scandal at the end of his career. According to legend, the elegant, silver-haired Clifford would greet every new customer by saying he had no influence and would not go to see the president on a client's behalf (wink, wink). The fixer is almost always a lawyer and recoils at even being called a lobbyist.

The fixer styles himself in opposition to the swindler. His habitat is the Georgetown drawing room or the Metropolitan Club, where he retells his well-worn anecdotes about LBJ and Richard Nixon, not Tom DeLay. He doesn't socialize promiscuously or revel in the high life. His work takes place over the phone or in boring, substantive meetings. The fixer is the soul of discretion and would never drop the names of clients, with whom he cultivates decades-long relationships. What, if anything, he accomplishes for them remains largely a mystery, since neither he nor they want you to know.

Leading Washington fixers have been quoted in the press in recent days trying to explain that what they do is categorically different from what Abramoff was up to. He was gauche and corrupt; they do dignified work protected by the Constitution. In fact, the differences between fixers and swindlers are mostly cosmetic and irrelevant from the point of view of the public interest.

In economic terms, hired-gun lobbyists of all varieties engage in "rent-seeking"—finding a way to rake off a share of someone else's profits by interposing themselves in what ought to be open processes of democratic decision-making. In so doing, they make everyone poorer, except perhaps cigar sellers and suppliers of prime beef to Washington restaurants. In a way, the fixers are worse than the swindlers because they are likely to be more effective at inserting indecipherable little clauses into legislation that result in more government spending or reduced tax revenue.

To be sure, private and organized interests have every right to press their cases with lawmakers and regulators. But mercenary lobbyists, who sell influence that has usually been acquired through past work in government, are doing something inherently disreputable. Professional lobbyists exploit relationships and knowledge they developed as public servants for the purpose of enriching themselves. What they do may be technically legal, but it is nonetheless corrupt, because it's an exchange (if not a specific transaction) of campaign contributions and other goodies for special treatment in the legislative process.

Until the current scandal, the party that runs Washington openly celebrated the lobbying industry, regarding it as a branch of its endless patronage empire and a kind of Fifth Estate. Now even Republican congressmen who were planning to one day become lobbyists will feel compelled to vote for tighter restrictions, such as longer waiting periods before they can lobby their old colleagues and more stringent disclosure laws. But such reforms will mean very little unless professional lobbying comes to be regarded once again as a shady and shameful activity, rather than the quickest way to get rich if you happen to lose an election.

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