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Tribes Disappointed After Gifts to DNC Land-Seeking Indians Who Gave \$107,000 Cite Pressure to Hire Consultants, Donate More

By Susan Schmidt
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Washington -- Last year, the Cheyenne-Arapaho Indians of Oklahoma kicked in \$107,000 to the Democratic National Committee and hoped the money would help result in favorable Clinton administration action on the return of their tribal lands.

It didn't happen.

Since then, the two tiny tribes, plagued by chronic unemployment, have been asked for still more campaign contributions and are being pressured to hire high-profile consultants with close ties to the Clinton White House, tribal officials say.

A longtime fund-raiser for Vice President Gore, Nathan Landow, has been seeking to represent the tribes, and he has brought in Clinton-Gore campaign manager Peter Knight's lobbying firm to win return of the lands.

Landow touted his and Knight's access to top administration aides, the tribal officials added.

In a meeting last month, tribal leaders said, Landow explicitly warned that if the tribes did not agree to sign a contract with him, he would make sure they never got their land. The Knight firm is seeking a \$100,000 retainer plus \$10,000 a month for its representation. Landow has proposed that his Bethesda development company get 10 percent of all royalties from mineral rights on the land, which the tribes predict, based on geological surveys, ultimately could be worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

"We're trying to learn to work all the angles -- we have to," said tribal business council secretary Archie Hoffman, explaining why the impoverished tribes would consider such a plan.

The solicitation of the tribes for contributions and consulting fees by people with influence at the highest levels of government is a new twist on an old practice. In this instance, it is not the wealthy and powerful who are being courted for cash, but people who are powerless and vulnerable.

The president's aides have said that notwithstanding perks the White House doled out to big donors -- like a

meal with Clinton -- no one was led to believe their financial contribution would affect government policies. And Gore, who has been criticized for using his high office to solicit contributions, has said he never pressured anyone to give and finds the idea repugnant.

"We got great hopes we're going to get our land back this year," Hoffman said.

The hopes have been bought at a high price.

The \$107,000 the tribes gave the DNC last year came from a welfare fund maintained for tribal members who need help with heating bills and other emergencies, such as big hospital bills. After they agreed to make a donation, tribal leaders were invited to a White House lunch, where they raised the issue of the land claim with President Clinton. They also met with Gore at two receptions for big donors.

This year the calls for money have kept on coming.

Tribal spokesman Tyler Todd said he received a phone call Feb. 25 from Mitchell Berger, a Gore fund-raiser, asking for a \$25,000 donation to help cover the cost of the Inauguration. Todd said it was the third call for money the tribes received from Clinton-Gore operatives in the past few weeks.

During the most recent solicitation by Berger, Todd recalled in an interview, the fund-raiser chided him that tribal leaders "were players in 1996, but we're not responding in '97." Todd said when he reminded Berger that Gore had promised to come to Oklahoma to raise money for the state party, "he said, of course they could get the vice president out here, but it would cost us a quarter of a million dollars."

The handling of the land claim, meanwhile, has become a source of dispute between tribal leaders and the Washington advocates they hoped would help them.

Landow has denied touting his access to the administration or threatening the tribes. He said tribe members were first brought to him in December by a Democratic campaign worker, and he listened to their concerns "to be polite." He acknowledged sending the tribes a consulting contract last week, but said he is busy and "never had any intention" of actually following through on the proposal.



Knight, for his part, said he has had little to do with the tribes and knows nothing about Landow touting influence with the administration. He attended one brief meeting with Landow and tribal representatives last month at his lobbying firm, Wunder, Diefenderfer, Cannon & Thelen, but said the session ended quickly when the tribal business chairman did not show up.

“I am not going to be involved; I am not going to make one call,” Knight said in an interview. “I told my partner I’m not going to represent these folks, but if you want to, go ahead.”

His partner, Ken Levine, is negotiating a lobbying arrangement with the tribes, Knight conceded. An associate at the firm, Joseph Trapasso, a former Clinton White House aide, also has met with tribal representatives several times over the past few months.

Berger has had no involvement in the discussions over the tribes’ land. He said he simply has been trying to get the tribes to pay for inauguration tickets they had pledged to buy, and he emphasized that it is pretty standard for the national party to count on raising a minimum of \$250,000 when Gore appears at a fund-raiser. “Usually when the vice president was going to events,” Berger said, “it was usually a quarter of a million dollars that would be required.”

Costly Quest for Land

The saga of the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribes’ costly investment in national politics began last spring.

Most of the tribes’ 11,000 members live in dusty hamlets spread across the prairie landscape of northwest Oklahoma. The tribes have long struggled with an 80 percent unemployment rate. For decades, leaders have pinned their economic hopes on winning the return of about 7,500 acres within their reservation taken by the federal government in 1869 for a military fort. The tribes say they want to develop a truck stop or outlet stores there, and make 19th century Fort Reno a tourist attraction.

Fort Reno is closed and the land is under the control of the Agriculture Department, which maintains a small research project there. The tribes either want the Agriculture Department to declare the land surplus and turn it back to them through the Interior Department or the president to issue an executive order returning the land.

Last spring, lawyer Mike Turpen, a major DNC fund-raiser in Oklahoma, talked to tribal business chairman Charles Surveyor about getting the tribes involved in the Clinton-Gore reelection effort.

“The chairman sat down with him one day,” said tribal lawyer Richard Grellner. “They had not been politically involved before, but they walked around D.C. for a year and a half. . . . It was pretty clear that if we didn’t get our issues heard we weren’t going to get anywhere.”

Turpen and tribal leaders believed they surely could get attention in Washington if they were the biggest DNC donors in the state.

“Turpen said give \$100,000; he said that’s the way you gotta work,” said Hoffman, the tribal business council secretary. Turpen acknowledged soliciting the tribes.

The tribes agreed April 30 to use some of their bingo and smoke shop profits to make the contribution, and Turpen, working with Clinton-Gore finance chairman Terry McAuliffe, got Todd and Surveyor invited to a June 17 White House lunch with Clinton and a handful of others. When they walked into DNC headquarters that morning, said Todd and Grellner, McAuliffe assistant Jason McIntosh asked them whether they had brought their promised \$100,000 check. They said they would wire the money when they got back to Oklahoma.

“In order to be heard, we gave a \$100,000 contribution to the Democratic Party,” said Hoffman.

McAuliffe accompanied Todd and Surveyor to a White House lunch with Clinton. There were a few other big donors in attendance, including philanthropist Peter L. Buettenwieser, who told the Philadelphia Inquirer last week that McAuliffe offered to get him into that “truly intimate luncheon” with the president if he wrote a check for \$50,000 to the DNC. McAuliffe vehemently denied Buettenwieser’s claim, calling him “a kook.” He declined to return phone calls for this story.

Todd and Surveyor said Clinton listened to their concerns about Fort Reno without promising anything. But he asked an assistant if the White House had a file on the issue, and the tribe officials came away encouraged.

“I think they were in awe. I think they had felt like it was the first time in 100 years they have been heard,” said Grellner.

A week or two after they returned to Oklahoma, Grellner said, McIntosh began calling to ask for the contribution check. “It takes a while for tribes to get things done,” Grellner said. “I got two or three calls, I think the chairman and Tyler talked to him. The crux of it was ‘Are you going to send it?’ “

McIntosh denied calling the tribes for money or asking if they brought a check the day of their lunch with Clinton. “That wouldn’t be the case at all,” he said.

The business council voted July 9 to send the money. It cashed an \$87,000 certificate of deposit and wired it to the DNC. The funds were not reported to the Federal Election Commission because of an oversight, according to DNC spokeswoman Amy Weiss Tobe. An amended report was filed last month. A second contribution to Clinton’s birthday celebration brought the tribes’ contributions to \$107,000.

No Promises, No Changes

The tribes’ leaders say that though Clinton never made any promises about their land, they were disappointed when the election came and went and not much had changed.



An opinion was pending at Interior about the legal merits of their claim and the Agriculture Department was still backing its research facility at Fort Reno. Members of the Oklahoma congressional delegation, led by Sen. Don Nickles (R), opposed returning Fort Reno to the tribes now, arguing that the research facility benefited farmers in the state.

Grellner said tribe members were annoyed they could no longer get through to McAuliffe or other party officials in Washington. Their feeling was, Grellner said, "The campaign's over, it's all done, at least respond to our inquiries."

Enter Mike Copperthite, a Democratic Party campaign worker who had gotten to know some tribal officials during last year's campaign. He felt sorry for them, he said. In December, he took Surveyor, Hoffman and Grellner to meet Landow, whom he knew slightly, in hopes Landow could remind administration officials that Clinton was interested in getting the land returned. "Nate said, 'No, no, no. The president didn't make any promises. He met with you as a favor.' I said, 'Can you rectify it?' Nate says let me check it out."

At a second meeting the following day, this one attended also by Knight associate Joseph Trapasso, Landow told the tribe members that they would have a good chance of getting their land back if they hired Knight, tribe members said.

"He said he was Clinton-Gore '96 manager," Grellner said. "He said Knight would review the case and the issue and find out whether he could get it done, and he wouldn't take the case if he couldn't deliver." Another meeting participant said Landow told them: "You'll have the most powerful people working for you."

Landow proposed an economic package, which he amended at a third meeting on Jan. 21 at the Mayflower restaurant. Knight said he came to the fourth meeting "as a courtesy" to meet the tribal business chairman. With Surveyor not there, he exited quickly. An irate Landow lambasted Grellner and Copperthite, saying they had wasted his time, according to several participants.

"It came clearly out of the meeting we would not get the land back if we didn't use him. Somebody would have picked up the phone and it would not have happened," said Grellner. Copperthite confirmed Grellner's account that Landow used a graphic phrase to say that he would retaliate "if you don't sign this deal."

Landow said any suggestion that he threatened the tribal representatives is "totally incorrect." He said the tribes came to him for development advice, and if they chose him because he was someone with strong ties to Gore "they picked the wrong one."

Asked whether his proposed 10 percent fee was exorbitant, Landow said, "No. That's a commission." He said the tribes wanted him to develop a master plan for the land. The contract he sent the tribes last week -- which bears Landow's signature -- makes no mention of a master plan. It says he shall "identify suitable business opportunities" for the land, negotiate with entities that propose to do

business there, locate capital and make use of federal contracts to promote business there.

The tribes would pay Landow 10 percent from income-producing activity on the land, including real estate sales, for the next 20 years, including "a 10 percent net working interest in any production or development of natural resources, including oil and gas production."

Landow said he redrafted a proposal offered by the tribes to put it into "legible form" so it would be "closer to something I might consider."

"To tell you the truth, I feel kind of sorry for them; they seem kind of destitute," Landow said. The tribes are getting poor advice about how to handle the land issue, he said. "As a favor, I thought maybe I'd find a way to do it."

