

Tom,
thank you for your guiding light
Nation for Indian people
Ernest Siskey

Unfolding scandal tears at tribe with leading role

Coushattas sent \$32 million to lobbyist, consultant accused of fraud, money laundering

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USA TODAY



KINDERHOOK, La. — The Coushatta and Hotel and Casino Resort sits out of the marshy flatlands like a misshapen, fluorescent-schooner in an ocean of parked cars. Along with riches, it has vided upon its namesake Indian tribe leading role in a scandal unfolding nearly 1,300 miles away.

The Louisiana Coushatta tribe has about 800 members. The casino brings in \$300 million a year. In less than three years, the tribe has paid \$32 million to two Washington, D.C., insiders who are now being investigated by two Senate committees, the Justice Department, the FBI, the IRS and the Interior Department. The probes involve suspicions of fraud, money laundering and other crimes.

Members of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee and the panel's investigators say lobbyist Jack Abramoff and public relations consultant Michael Scanlon received \$2 million from a dozen tribes rich in gambling interests. Last year, Sen. Chairman Ben Nighthorse Campbell, R-Colo., and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who is now chairman, called Abramoff's and Scanlon's actions a way to exploit Indians' new wealth and the pair's ties to powerful figures such as House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas. Following the pair's instructions, the tribes also gave millions to political figures and groups, according to documents from the Indian Affairs investigation released by the committee.

huge profits Scanlon and Abramoff pocketed (\$21 million apiece, according to the committee); the inexperience of the tribal clients; the names Abramoff and Scanlon called their clients in e-mails released by the committee ("monkeys," "monkeys," "losers" and "troglodytes"); and committee documents that suggest money laundering, fraud and other possible crimes.

"Legislation is being marinated in money, and access is being marinated in money," says Marshall Wittmann, a senior fellow at the Democratic Leadership Council and a former aide to McCain. "It's inevitable that the lines were going to be crossed and then blurred and then obliterated."

As casino profits transform Indian economies, "there's been a hovering by enterprising people who would like to represent tribes," says Campbell, a Northern Cheyenne. "Where the hell were you when we were poor?"

A tribe divided



Divisions: Coushatta tribal council members Harold John, left, and David Siskey are at odds with three other members who continued paying and defending a lobbyist and consultant now under investigation.



Cash cow: The Coushatta casino brings in about \$300 million a year. The tribe is suing to recover \$32 million it paid to two Washington insiders.

Several miles from the Coushatta casino, past catfish farms and fields of grazing cows and horses, is what prominent Republicans in and out of Congress help the Coushatta. Two casino bids by competing

controller Erick LaRocque sounded an alarm. The tribe had paid \$32 million from 2001 to 2003 for "lobbying" expenses, he wrote in a memo to Langley; \$24 million came from funds designated for health, housing and education. There was no plan to reimburse those funds, nor was there any money to do so.

Rift on the council

Several current and former members of the five-person tribal council say they tried to stop the spending but were thwarted by a three-member majority. They were doing everything behind their backs," member Harold John says.

David Siskey, a lobbyist who was elected in 2003, says the Washington pair's financial activities and name-calling were "pretty upsetting to me." But he reserves his harshest judgment for the three council members who kept paying and defending them.

"We have to make every attempt to show ... that tribes are capable of governing themselves," Siskey says. "These three individuals are not helping the cause."

The trio — Poncho, William Worfel and Leonard Battise — did not return calls for comment. Their attorney, David Pore, said they "absolutely were misled by Abramoff and Scanlon. Asked why they didn't demand detailed invoices of what the tribe was getting for its money, Pore replied, "The level of sophistication was not there at that time. They've come a long way."

Poncho and Worfel praised Scanlon and Abramoff for nearly a year after the LaRocque memo. But in November, the tribe sued the Washington pair for the \$32 million plus damages. The lawsuit alleges fraud and other wrongdoing.

Abbe Lowell, Abramoff's lawyer, said Abramoff "provided great results for the fees that were paid."

The millions the tribe paid for "professional services" and contributions offer glimpses of the capital's money culture. The documents show the Coushattas contributed \$3.7 million from 2001 to 2003 to the American International Center (AIC), a think tank in Rehoboth Beach, a Delaware resort town. But mainly it was a cash conduit to Abramoff and others.

From May 2000 to May 2001, the Senate documents show AIC checks for nearly \$2 million went to consulting firm Century Strategies, owned by Ralph Reed, a former Christian Coalition leader and Bush campaign official now running for Georgia lieutenant governor.

Documents show direct Coushatta contributions went to, among others, anti-tax activist Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform (\$25,000), DeLay's political committees (at least \$45,000) and