

A Lobbying Scandal -- Not a Tribal Scandal

By Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD)

As both Vice Chairman of the Senate Ethics Committee and a member of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, I have been absolutely appalled at the scope and the depth of the villainy associated with the Abramoff lobbying scandal.

Inasmuch as Washington recently has become consumed and distracted by the utterly shameful actions of disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, I believe that it is essential to understand just how far removed from this scandal Indian tribes are. While a small handful of tribes represented by Mr. Abramoff and were victimized by his incredibly shady and cynical manipulation of their funds, the vast majority of our nation's 560 tribes and Alaskan Native Villages had nothing to do with him or his practices. Less than half of those tribes operate casinos and only a tiny proportion of those generate the kind of money that would attract the likes of Mr. Abramoff.

Most of the tribes that operate casinos are far from wealthy. The myth that all or most gaming Indian tribes are rolling in dough, is wildly incorrect. The tribes in South Dakota and many around the country have large land bases and extensive enrolled memberships. Their casinos are often located in remote, rural areas far away from large numbers of affluent customers, and set amidst dire levels of poverty and unemployment. The truth is that most of these casinos provide some badly needed jobs and only a modest amount of revenue. The income that remains after payroll expenses are largely then immediately consumed by a huge backlog of financial needs for education, housing, health and economic development within their reservations.

While a few Indian tribes were associated with Mr. Abramoff, the fees they paid were far beyond what most tribes could possibly afford-- and in the end, their hired lobbyist abused both their money and their trust. Clearly, this scandal was a lobbying scandal, not a tribal scandal. The reality in too much of Indian country is the consequence of chronic poverty: shocking levels of disease, inadequate housing, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, low school graduation rates, hunger, and stressed families. These tribes aren't paying Washington lobbyists millions of dollars, but instead are struggling every day to make ends meet and to help restore the dignity of their members.

While I did not receive any money from Jack Abramoff, I did receive legal contributions from tribes he represented. I am proud of the support Indian tribes and individual Native Americans have extended to me over the years. We must help restore the American public's faith in good, responsible government and preserve participation by sovereign Indian tribes in our democracy.

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