

# White House aide resigns in influence-peddling scandal

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The corruption investigation into the activities of Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff claimed its first White House figure October 6, when Susan B. Ralston, executive assistant to Karl Rove, Bush's top political operative, resigned her position. A White House spokeswoman said that Ralston "did not want to be a distraction to the White House" in the month before the November elections.

Ralston has long been known to have close ties to Abramoff, since she worked as his chief of staff before moving on to a similar position for Rove. But the pressure on the White House escalated last week after the release of a congressional report documenting hundreds of Abramoff contacts with the White House, many of them involving visits to Ralston, and dozens of gifts from the multi-millionaire lobbyist to his former aide.

Abramoff headed a lobbying empire which raked in tens of millions of dollars in contracts from clients such as Indian tribes seeking federal licenses to operate gambling casinos on tribal land, defense contractors seeking special mention ("earmarking") in congressional appropriations bills, and sweatshop owners in the Northern Marianas Islands, seeking exemption from federal labor laws. He traded on his network of contacts among Republican operatives on Capitol Hill and in the Bush administration, many of them dating back to his years in the College Republicans.

In addition to the thinly disguised bribery that passes for a normal day's work in the Washington lobbying business—millions in campaign contributions in, billions in congressional appropriations out—Abramoff was an enthusiastic practitioner of outright bilking of his own clients. He steered contracts from his lobbying clients to a public relations firm, set up by his cronies, who

then kicked back much of their fees to Abramoff. In one notorious case, he pitted Indian tribes against each other, collecting fees from both sides in a fight over casino licensing in Louisiana.

The scandal has so far had its biggest impact in Congress, with one Republican congressman, Robert Ney of Ohio, pleading guilty last month to bribery charges, and another, former Majority Leader Tom DeLay, forced to resign his seat. DeLay's former chief of staff, Tony Rudy, has pleaded guilty to receiving bribes from Abramoff.

The senator most closely tied to Abramoff, Republican Conrad Burns of Montana, is trailing in his reelection bid. Another Abramoff crony, Ralph Reed, former head of the ultra-right Christian Coalition, lost his bid for the Republican nomination for lieutenant-governor of Georgia earlier this year in a contest in which the scandal was the principal issue.

Ralston's resignation marks the furthest inroads which the Abramoff affair has made into the Bush White House itself. Another executive branch official, David Safavian, head of procurement for the Office of Management and Budget, was convicted in June on charges of lying to federal investigators about his contacts with Abramoff.

The congressional report found that Ralston had accepted expensive tickets from Abramoff to sports events and concerts on at least nine occasions. In the course of at least 69 documented contacts with Abramoff, she served as a go-between to bring his most urgent requests to the notice of Rove and his then-deputy, Ken Mehlman, now chairman of the Republican National Committee.

The report found that Abramoff and his lobbying associates spent nearly \$25,000 on meals and tickets for White House officials, much of this on Ralston. One set

of four tickets for a Washington Wizards basketball game cost nearly \$1,300.

These sums were expended to gain access. Rove, for example, joined Abramoff in his box at an NCAA college basketball tournament game in 2002, although he reimbursed the lobbyist for the cost of the ticket. Afterwards Abramoff boasted to an associate that Rove “told me anytime we need something just let him know through Susan.”

In October 2001, she relayed a memo to Rove from Abramoff about withholding a Republican political endorsement in the Mariana Islands governor’s race. The following day she e-mailed Abramoff, “You win. KR says no endorsement,” reporting that Rove had agreed.

In another case, Mehlman apparently helped an Abramoff-represented Indian tribe get a \$16 million federal grant to build a new jail. Abramoff thanked him with free tickets to a rock concert.

White House officials claimed that Rove was unaware of his chief aide’s frequent contacts with Ralston, and White House counsel Harriet Miers reviewed the report and closed its inquiry after Ralston’s resignation. “Nothing more will come from the report, no further fallout from the report,” Bush spokeswoman Dana Perino said.

The ranking Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee, which issued the report, said that the contacts with Ralston amounted to only a small fraction of Abramoff’s efforts at the White House—69 out of the 485 contacts listed—making the closing of the inquiry premature, to say the least. Congressman Henry Waxman of California said there were “many unanswered questions about the assistance that higher-ranking White House officials appeared to provide Mr. Abramoff.”

Ralston and Abramoff engaged in sporadic discussion about her leaving the White House and going to work for his lobbying operations. In one e-mail in November 2002, she told Abramoff, “It would take a significant amount of money for me to be lured away [from the White House], so unless you’re really serious and can make it worth my while, let’s wait until 2005.”

By then, however, reports in the *Washington Post* and other newspapers had sparked a federal investigation into Abramoff’s affairs. Ralston herself was taken care of, however. She was promoted after Bush’s reelection,

receiving the title of special assistant to the president at a nearly-doubled salary.



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