

Casino Jack: The corruption scandals of the Bush years

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Directed by George Hickenlooper, written by Norman Snider

“If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog,” counsels Jack Abramoff in George Hickenlooper’s movie *Casino Jack*. Kevin Spacey stars as Abramoff, the Washington influence peddler who bought and sold congressmen and government officials during the Bush White House era.

Hickenlooper (who died in October 2010 at the age of 47) begins his quasi-docudrama in the late 1990s at the height of Abramoff’s reign as king of K Street—the center of Washington’s powerful lobbying industry (“Everybody sells access”).

Abramoff is shown telling his mirrored reflection that “mediocrity is where most people live. Mediocrity is the elephant in the room. It’s ubiquitous.... And those of us who know this, those of us who understand the disease of the dull, we do something about it.... You’re either a big leaguer or you’re a slave clawing your way onto the C train.”

The Abramoff case is a complicated and potentially fascinating subject for a film. His lobbying empire took in millions of dollars by defrauding clients such as Indian tribes seeking government licenses to operate casinos and sweatshop owners in the Northern Marianas Islands looking for exemption from US federal labor laws. He built his business on ties to top Republican and right-wing figures such as one-time House speaker Tom DeLay of Texas, chief Bush political aide Karl Rove, anti-tax lobbyist Grover Norquist and Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition.

The movie skims across the surface of these events in rapid-fire manner. Hickenlooper seems interested in dispensing with the details and focusing on a study of the

Abramoff personality. Unfortunately, the director appears less concerned with Abramoff as *a social type*.

While Hickenlooper shows the lobbyist calling his Native American clients “monkeys,” “troglodytes,” and “idiots,” the film spends at least as much time admiring Abramoff’s charm, religiosity as an Orthodox Jew (“God wants us to be financially liquid”) and qualities as a good family man. In any event, balancing out his “good” and “bad” sides is not really the issue. Abramoff, to quote Edgar G. Ulmer’s *Ruthless*, “wasn’t a man. He was a way of life.”

Too much is made of Abramoff’s love of movies, with his habit of doing impersonations taking the edge off his misdeeds. He did try his hand at making money as a Hollywood producer, a career move that culminated in the anticommunist potboiler *Red Scorpion* (1988), shot in South African-occupied Namibia.

With the exception of two “Team Abramoff” players, Michael Scanlon (a former DeLay aide) and Adam Kidan (a disbarred lawyer and a mattress hawker)—played by Barry Pepper and Jon Lovitz, respectively—the rest of the characters, including the pivotal DeLay himself (Spencer Garrett), lack sufficient definition. Pepper’s reptilian traits and Lovitz’s dissoluteness are a spicy counterweight.

But so much of *Casino Jack*’s effort is poured into creating the Spacey character—remarkably undertaken by the actor—that plot segments remain undeveloped and events unexplored in depth, thus making way for a sanitized makeover of the protagonist.

As the WWSW observed in January 2006: “Abramoff was more than just a corrupt influence-peddler. He had close connections to the underworld of extreme right and fascist elements, both within the United States and internationally. In the early 1980s, Abramoff headed Citizens for America, a group founded by drugstore multimillionaire Lewis Lehrman. In that capacity he

organized a meeting of anticommunist guerillas from Laos, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Angola, under the auspices of Jonas Savimbi, leader of the South African and US-backed UNITA guerillas. Savimbi was one of the most notorious mass murderers in Africa. The Republican operative also worked under contract for the South African apartheid regime, which paid \$1.5 million a year to Abramoff's International Freedom Foundation."

Team Abramoff was a crooked alliance of Christian fundamentalists, pro-Zionists, anti-tax fanatics and neo-conservative ideologues all beholden to corporate America.

Despite its soft focus, *Casino Jack* does evoke something of the outlook and mentality of a venal American elite deeply hostile to the population.

Deserving special mention is a scene near the film's denouement set in a hearing of the US Senate's Indian Affairs Committee, chaired by Arizona Republican John McCain. Hickenlooper enhances the drama by intercutting real footage of the event. Advised to invoke the Fifth Amendment (against self-incrimination), Abramoff, in a fantasy sequence, denounces the hypocrisy of his interrogators, particularly McCain. Told he's out of order by the chairman, Abramoff explodes: "*You're out of order! You're all out of order! This whole Senate hearing is out of order!*" It is a *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* moment!

According to the director: "*Casino Jack* is a story of greed and hubris so Gothic that it seems more like a crime thriller." Hickenlooper further comments that "something insidious happened to our great country where our leaders adopted a corrosive way of looking at the world through a monetary prism to the point where our whole way of life had become commodified in every sense of the word, from politics to popular culture. We lost our way as a nation. The US had lost its sense of humanity and its soul. I believe Abramoff was one of these lost souls, an idealist who believed in the power of the individual as steward of civilization but his views were warped by the money, power and hubris of capitalism run amok."

This is a rather superficial view of things, all too common on the liberal left. While there may be Gothic elements in the Abramoff story, he was not an aberration nor was the case an example of "capitalism run amok." It is a story rather of American capitalism in its present, decayed state, with economic life increasingly oriented to parasitic activities and a political elite that has swung far to the right. The Abramoffs of this world come onto the scene along with the Kenneth Starrs, DeLays and Roves,

and they accompany the atrocities at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, as well as the mass destruction of jobs and living standards of wide layers of the US population. Abramoff was merely a steward of the barbarians.

Moreover, there is reason to suspect that Spacey's Abramoff is far more charming than the actual individual. That being said, one is not arguing that Abramoff should be made into a demon. A serious film treatment of even quite reprehensible figures is in order, which considers them objectively and intelligently. In his own way, Abramoff was the (admittedly willing) victim of a set of circumstances and a certain social atmosphere. He was simultaneously tragicomic and an exploiter of the worst sort. But it apparently takes an artist on the order of Orson Welles to tackle the dichotomy.

Hollywood films tend to round things off and reduce complex social phenomena to the question of individual choices and behavior. Few projects can manage the interplay between individual action and the large, objective framework in which it occurs. Instead of the world as a whole, filmmakers generally see only the particular person or problem, if that.

The question, which goes largely unanswered, is: what does the Abramoff episode say about the American political system and the rise to the top of these criminal elements? Abramoff was caught and jailed, but the rest of the crowd in Washington continue to rake in fortunes in the current everything-for-the-kleptocracy climate.

Casino Jack's creators never look beyond the one or two "bad apples," not caring to see that bushels of them have fallen from a fatally poisoned tree.



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