

Clarence Thomas admits to free flights last year with billionaire Harlan Crow

Patrick Martin
31 August 2023

In further confirmation of his close ties to ultraright billionaires, Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas released a financial report Thursday morning which provided new details about gifts that he received, including free trips, costly vacations and other lucrative perks.

Thomas's filing revealed that he took three trips on the private plane of real estate billionaire Harlan Crow, a large-scale contributor to the Republican Party and other right-wing groups, whom he described as a close personal friend. All three trips were to properties owned by Crow, a conference center in Dallas for the first two and an estate in the Adirondack Mountains of New York for the third, where Thomas took a six-day vacation at the billionaire's expense. According to press reports, Thomas vacations there every year.

The Supreme Court justice said the first trip was to avoid bad weather which had grounded commercial flights, while the second was on the advice of his security detail, after a leak revealed that the court majority was about to repeal *Roe v. Wade*, threatening abortion rights.

Thomas also acknowledged two financial arrangements with Crow for the benefit of members of his family, which he had previously concealed but had been reported by *ProPublica* and other media outlets. He claimed that he had "inadvertently failed to realize" that these transactions—a decade old or more—had to be reported.

The billionaire bought the home in Savannah, Georgia, where Thomas's mother lived and which Thomas and other family members owned, giving her a life interest in it—a guarantee that she would be able to live in it rent-free. He also paid for two years of private school tuition for Thomas's great-nephew, who was being raised by the Supreme Court justice. In effect,

both payments went into Thomas's pocket.

Thomas and his fellow ultra-right justice Samuel Alito filed their financial reports three months later than the other seven justices, after they requested 90-day extensions from the Administrative Office of the US Courts. Both came under public criticism at the time of the May 15 filing deadline after press revelations of their cozy relations with fascistic billionaires.

These gentlemen discovered their "friendship" with the jurists only after the two had been placed on the Supreme Court and had demonstrated their commitment to a consistently right-wing policy of attacking democratic rights and defending the "rights" of corporations and the wealthy.

Alito's late filing did not include any additional information on free trips or other gifts, making it unclear why he needed another three months to assemble the data. The justice has responded bitterly and publicly to the criticism of his cashing in on his role on the highest US court, writing an op-ed column in the *Wall Street Journal* (where he could be confident that his rich "friends" would see it), defending their right to give him and other justices as much as they pleased and attacking any criticism as politically motivated.

One of the free trips reported in *ProPublica* stands out. In 2008, he flew to a fishing resort in Alaska on the private jet of hedge fund billionaire Paul Singer, who later had multiple cases before the Supreme Court. Alito did not recuse himself from any of these, claiming later that he was unaware of Singer's role in the companies involved in the various cases.

The Alaska trip was reportedly organized by Leonard Leo, the wealthy attorney who helped found the Federalist Society, lobbied extensively for Alito's own

confirmation, and supplied the list of right-wing justices from which Trump selected all his nominees to the Supreme Court and the various appeals courts and district courts.

After the financial forms were released, Thomas's attorney Eliot Berke issued a six-page letter which claimed, "after reviewing Justice Thomas's records, I am confident there has been no willful ethics transgression, and any prior reporting errors were strictly inadvertent."

In addition to this rubber stamp—which has no credibility, since Berke is being paid by Thomas—the lawyer launched into a denunciation of those who reported on Thomas's links to various billionaires, which include 38 lucrative vacations and 26 free plane flights.

"No Justice, Justice Thomas included, should be subjected to such political blood sport," he wrote. "It is painfully obvious that these attacks are motivated by hatred for his judicial philosophy, not by any real belief in any ethical lapses."

Unlike other judges in the federal court system, the Supreme Court has no ethics rules beyond the requirements federal law imposes on all government employees. Chief Justice John Roberts has suggested that any ethics standards imposed by Congress would be a violation of the constitutional separation of powers, and he refused to testify on the subject before a Senate committee, for the same reason.

Congressional Democrats postured in opposition to this declaration of immunity. A letter from 10 Democratic members of the Senate Judiciary Committee declared, "It is unacceptable for the highest court in the land to have the lowest ethical standards, and because the Court has abdicated its responsibility to establish its own standards, Congress must act."

There is no actual possibility of any legislation passing Congress and even if it did, the Supreme Court could strike it down as unconstitutional. Moreover, moderate-liberal justices appointed by Democratic presidents, including Sonya Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, have their own conflicts of interest, even if on a less flagrant scale than those of Thomas and Alito.

While the Democrats and the media focus attention on Thomas's and Alito's intimate relations with the superrich, they have said little or nothing about their even more serious connections to the fascist right,

particularly the effort by ex-President Donald Trump to overturn the 2020 elections which culminated in the January 6, 2021 attack on Capitol Hill.

Thomas's wife Virginia is a longtime Republican Party activist with close ties to many leading congressional Republicans. She sent incessant messages to Trump and his White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, urging them to stand firm and defy a Biden victory. She sent dozens of messages to state legislators in Arizona and Wisconsin, urging them to overturn Biden's narrow margin of victory in those states and approve Trump electors instead of those chosen by the voters.

As for Alito, on January 6 he had a court order to block the congressional certification of Biden's Electoral College victory in his back pocket, submitted by pro-Trump lawyers. (Alito is the Supreme Court justice who handles appeals from Washington D.C.) He only decided not to go forward with this when it became clear that the mob would not be successful in holding the Capitol and dispersing Congress.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact