

Clarence Thomas demanded more money just before receiving gifts from his ultra-rich supporters

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Supreme Court Judge Clarence Thomas demanded a salary increase and threatened to quit the high court in 2000 just before ultra-rich supporters stepped in and gifted him with cash and other favors, according to a new report published by ProPublica on Monday.

Based on interviews and other documents that have not been previously available to the public, ProPublica reported that, after nearly a decade on the court, Thomas “had grown frustrated with his financial situation.”

At the time, “Thomas’ salary was \$173,600, equivalent to over \$300,000 today. But he was one of the least wealthy members of the court, and on multiple occasions in that period, he pushed for ways to make more money.”

Thomas attended an “off-the-record conservative conference” in early January 2000 at a five-star beach resort in Sea Island, Georgia, at which he gave a speech. On the flight back, Thomas sat with Florida Republican Representative Cliff Stearns and complained about his compensation.

Although Thomas’ keynote presentation at the Awakening conference, a “conservative thought weekend” that featured “golf, shooting lessons and aromatherapy along with panel discussions with businessmen and elected officials,” was paid for by the organizers, the Supreme Court judge did not include the trip on his annual financial disclosure.

While complaining to Stearns that Congress should give Supreme Court justices a pay increase, Thomas said that if lawmakers did not act, “one or more justices will leave soon,” possibly within the next year.

The ProPublica report says that Stearns—who served in the House of Representatives for 24 years and played

a leading role in the congressional efforts to undermine and end the right to abortion—became concerned that Thomas might resign from the Supreme Court.

In a recent interview, Stearns said of Thomas, “His importance as a conservative was paramount. We wanted to make sure he felt comfortable in his job, and he was being paid properly.”

ProPublica reviewed details of Thomas’ personal finances, including the fact that he “had borrowed \$267,000 from a friend to buy a high-end RV,” that he and his wife, Ginni, bought a house on five acres of land in Virginia for \$522,000 and that “the couple regularly borrowed more money, including a \$100,000 credit line on their house and a consumer loan of up to \$50,000.”

Among the documents obtained by ProPublica is a confidential memo from 2000 written to then-Chief Justice William Rehnquist by a top administrative official of the judiciary, L. Ralph Mecham. After he spoke with Stearns, Mecham wrote that the “delicate matter” of Supreme Court judge compensation needed to be addressed, “I understand that Justice Thomas clearly told him that in his view departures would occur within the next year or so.”

These right-wing figures at the court and in Congress were not only concerned about Clarence Thomas, who was among the least wealthy members of the court. Antonin Scalia, who was nominated by Ronald Reagan in 1986 and served until his death in 2016, had nine children and was not as wealthy as the other judges on the court.

As Mecham wrote to Rehnquist, “from a tactical point of view” Democrats in Congress might oppose a raise if they believed “the apparent purpose is to keep

Justices [Antonin] Scalia and Thomas on the Court.” Several months later, ProPublica says, “Rehnquist focused his annual year-end report on what he called ‘the most pressing issue facing the Judiciary: the need to increase judicial salaries.’”

The report goes on to say, “But around 2000, chatter that Thomas was dissatisfied about money circulated through conservative legal circles and on Capitol Hill, according to interviews with prominent attorneys, former members of Congress and Thomas’ friends. ‘It was clear he was unhappy with his financial situation and his salary,’ one friend said.”

At one point, an effort was mounted in Congress to lift the ban on justices being paid for making speeches. “At Sen. Mitch McConnell’s request, a provision removing the ban for judges was quietly inserted into a spending bill in mid-2000,” the report states. This move came under public scrutiny, including from the *Legal Times*, which referred to it as the “Keep Scalia on the Court” bill, and it was dropped.

ProPublica says, “Congress never lifted the ban on speaking fees or gave the justices a major raise. But in the years that followed, as ProPublica has reported, Thomas accepted a stream of gifts from friends and acquaintances that appears to be unparalleled in the modern history of the Supreme Court.”

In other words, to get around the problem of a politically motivated salary increase, other means were found to pay off the corrupt Clarence Thomas in exchange for his ongoing support for right-wing opinions on the court. The report continues, “Some defrayed living expenses large and small—private school tuition, vehicle batteries, tires. Other gifts from a coterie of ultrarich men supplemented his lifestyle, such as free international vacations on the private jet and superyacht of Dallas real estate billionaire Harlan Crow.”

A previous report by ProPublica published last April detailed the relationship between Thomas and Crow, which included large gifts that went undisclosed. Among these was that Crow paid for two years of private high school for Thomas’ grandnephew, worth approximately \$100,000.

Within several years, Clarence Thomas’ and his wife’s fortunes changed dramatically. In 2003, he received a \$1.5 million advance for his memoir and Ginni Thomas, who had been a congressional staffer,

was hired by the Heritage Foundation and “paid a salary in the low six figures.”

The new report summarizes the gifts showered on Thomas by his benefactors, “In 2008, another wealthy friend forgave ‘a substantial amount, or even all’ of the principal on the loan Thomas had used to buy the quarter-million dollar RV, according to a recent Senate inquiry prompted by *The New York Times*’ reporting. Much of the Thomas’ leisure time was also paid for by a small set of billionaire businessmen, who brought the justice and his family on free vacations around the world. (Thomas has said he did not need to disclose the gifts of travel and his lawyer has disputed the Senate findings about the RV.)”

Amid the numerous factual exposures of his out-and-out corruption, Clarence Thomas’ continued presence on the Supreme Court is an expression of the deep-going rot that pervades both big business parties and all three branches of the American government.



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