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Abramoff Investigation Models How Congress Can Battle Corruption

Today, the [Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy](#) and the [McCain Institute](#), in collaboration with the [U.S. Capitol Historical Society](#), are releasing a Portrait in Oversight describing the 2004 congressional investigation – led by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) – that exposed corrupt lobbying practices by Jack Abramoff and others and produced major lobbying and ethics reforms. The investigation models how Congress can play a key role in countering corruption.

“Corruption continues to plague the United States and the rest of the world,” said Jim Townsend, director of the Levin Center. “The good news is that Congress can use its investigative powers to expose wrongdoing and strengthen anti-corruption laws as shown by the Abramoff inquiry led by Sen. McCain. The new Portrait in Oversight commemorating that bipartisan effort reminds Congress and the public of what is possible.”

“As we’ve seen in many countries around the world, unchecked corruption can become a major impediment to free speech and human rights,” said Dr. Evelyn Farkas, executive director of the McCain Institute. “Sen. McCain’s dogged and innovative pursuit of flagrant ethics violations in 2004 can still be instructive in 2022. We are grateful to our partners at the Levin Center and the U.S. Capitol Historical Society for drafting and working with us to release this important Portrait in Oversight.”

In 2004, after a media account of exorbitant fees paid by several Native American tribes to Washington lobbyists Jack Abramoff and Michael Scanlon, Sen. McCain launched an investigation into the Washington world of political lobbying. The two-year McCain inquiry exposed a web of corrupt lobbying practices and led to high-profile resignations, prison sentences, and lobbying and ethics reforms.

The investigation was conducted on a bipartisan basis by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs which held five hearings, collected 750,000 pages of documents, interviewed 60 witnesses, and issued a 1,400-page report unanimously endorsed by committee members from both sides of the aisle. The inquiry exposed a succession of dirty tricks, corrupt practices, and over \$66 million in inflated fees paid to Mr. Abramoff and colleagues by victimized Native American tribes.

The committee's work led, in 2007, to the enactment of the [Honest Leadership and Open Government Act](#) which made numerous improvements to federal lobbying and ethics laws. In addition, the Department of Justice won convictions of over 20 lobbyists, federal officials, and members of Congress and their staffs including Mr. Abramoff, Mr. Scanlon, Deputy Interior Secretary Steven Griles, Office of Federal Procurement Policy head David Safavian, Rep. Robert Ney, and Rep. Tom DeLay's Deputy Chief of Staff Tony Rudy.

Following the facts wherever they led, Sen. McCain compelled Congress to acknowledge the corrupting influence of some lobbyists, exposed the exploitation of multiple Native American tribes, and generated momentum to strengthen U.S. lobbying and ethics laws. The Abramoff inquiry demonstrates how Congress, with appropriate leadership and bipartisan backing, can confront and curb corruption in the political process. It is a model that provides Congress with welcome guidance today on how to fight corruption.

In addition, complementing the new Portrait in Oversight is a new Levin Center podcast with Sen. McCain's chief investigator in the Abramoff matter, Pablo Carrillo. You can tune in to his insider explanation of the inquiry on the Levin Center's [Oversight Matters Podcast](#).

The Abramoff portrait is the latest [in a series of profiles developed by the Levin Center](#) of past congressional investigations and key figures in the history of legislative oversight. Together, the portraits explore congressional oversight from 1792 to the modern era, including inquiries into the Civil War, covert CIA operations, Enron, and Watergate and such figures as Representatives John Dingell and Elijah Cummings and Senators Harry Truman, Joe McCarthy, and Carl Levin. More portraits will be released later this year.

The Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy works to carry on the legacy of U.S. Senator Carl Levin who championed bipartisan, fact-based oversight and civil discourse. The Center is part of Wayne State University Law School in Detroit, hometown of Senator Levin, but does not necessarily present the views of either the university or law school. Inspired by Sen. John McCain and his family's legacy, the McCain Institute at Arizona State University is non-partisan and fights to secure democracy and alliances, defend human rights, protect the vulnerable and advance character-driven leadership in all communities around the world. The U.S. Capitol Historical Society is a congressionally chartered, non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to educating the public on the history and heritage of the U.S. Capitol.
