

When George Met Jack

White House aides deny Bush knew Abramoff, but photos suggest there's more to the story

By **ADAM ZAGORIN** and **MIKE ALLEN**

AS DETAILS POURED OUT ABOUT THE ILLEGAL and unseemly activities of Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff, White House officials sought to portray the scandal as a Capitol Hill affair with little relevance to them. Peppered for days with questions about Abramoff's visits to the White House, press secretary Scott McClellan said the now disgraced lobbyist had attended two huge holiday receptions and a few "staff-level meetings" that were not worth describing further. "The President does not know him, nor does the President recall ever meeting him," McClellan said.

The President's memory may soon be unhappily refreshed. TIME has seen five photographs of Abramoff and the President that suggest a level of contact between them that Bush's aides have downplayed. While TIME's source refused to provide the pictures for publication, they are likely to see the light of day eventually because celebrity tabloids are on the prowl for them. And that has been a fear of the Bush team's for the past several months: that a picture of the President with the admitted felon could become the iconic image of direct presidential involvement in a burgeoning corruption scandal.

In one shot that TIME saw, Bush appears with Abramoff, several unidentified people and Raul Garza Sr., a Texan Abramoff represented who was then chairman of the Kickapoo Indians, which owned a casino in southern Texas. Another photo shows Bush shaking hands with Abramoff in front of a window and a blue drape. Three other photos are of Bush, Abramoff and, in each view, one of the lobbyist's sons. A sixth picture shows several

Abramoff children with Bush and House Speaker Dennis Hastert, who is now pushing to tighten lobbying laws after declining to do so last year when the scandal was in its early stages.

Most of the pictures have the formal look of photos taken at presidential receptions. The images of Bush, Abramoff and one of his sons appear to be the rapid-fire shots—known in White House parlance as "clicks"—that the President snaps with top supporters before taking the podium at fund-raising receptions. Over five years, Bush has posed for tens of thousands of such shots—many with people he does not know.

Abramoff knew the game. In a 2001 e-mail to a lawyer for tribal leader Lovelin Poncho, he crowds about an upcoming White House meeting he had arranged for Poncho and says it should be a priceless asset in his client's upcoming re-election campaign as chief of Louisiana's Coushatta Indians. The e-mail, now part of a wide-ranging federal investigation into lobbyists' relationships with members of Congress, offers a window into Abramoff's willingness to invoke Bush's name to impress clients.

Abramoff was once in better graces at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, having raised at least \$100,000 for the President's re-election campaign. During 2001 and 2002, connections to the White House won him invitations to Hanukkah receptions, each attended by 400 to 500 people.

The White House describes the number of Abramoff's meetings with staff members as "a few," even though Bush aides have precise data about them. Pressed for particulars, McClellan said with brio, "People are insinuating things based on no evidence whatsoever." Senate minority leader Harry Reid of Nevada has demanded details, saying in a letter to Bush that Abramoff "may have had undue and improper influence within your Administration." ■

"The President does not know [Jack Abramoff]...."

—Scott McClellan,
White House
press secretary

Questions

1. Describe the photos of Abramoff and Bush.
2. How much money did Abramoff raise for President Bush's re-election campaign?