
by Julien Gorbach

F

centy-five minutes away from Lafayette, the Coushatta Indian reservation is tucked at the end of a desolate 16-mile stretch of prairie and ranch homes in Elton, La. Since 1995, the tribe's 850 members had grown accustomed to a quiet existence that's a sharp contrast to the pulsing nightlife of its glitzy Grand Casino Coushatta in nearby Kinder.

But in 2003, Coushatta tribe receptionist Flo Pitre's phone started to ring off the hook. In kitchens and living rooms throughout Elton, there was talk about the tribe's private corporate jet flying council members to meetings and other events. There were rumors of a 32-acre ranch out in Sulphur that appeared to be a private playground for tribal Chairman Lovelin Poncho.

"I guess you could say I'm the community's poster child," says Pitre. "People would call wondering if I could ask the council people [about the tribe's financial issues]."

Tribal members had no idea that they were about to discover a trail of corruption that stretched deep into Capitol Hill and the White House.

Abramoff and Washington's political power circles. Abramoff is now the poster child for lobbying reform, a kind of conservative super-lobbyist who peddled influence to a new level. All told, Abramoff bilked 11 Indian gaming tribes out of an estimated $85 million in lobbying fees, including $36.2 million from the Coushattas.

His web of connections, often referred to as "the house that Jack built," includes links to sweatshops in the U.S.-controlled Northern Mariana Islands and a gangland slaying in Florida. Abramoff's recent plea bargains with federal prosecutors have made him radioactive to the lawmakers he plied with lavish junkets, campaign contributions, skybox fundraisers, and dinners at Signatures, his top-tier restaurant. A half-dozen congressmen are now under investigation in connection with the scandal, along with aides, business associates and government officials.

Former House majority leader Tom DeLay and Ohio Rep. Robert Ney have had to relinquish their leadership posts. Both representatives have aides who snuck plea bargains in the case, and DeLay has announced he will not seek re-election.

Abramoff has also been an embarrassment for President George Bush. In January, Time magazine published photos of him and Abramoff at a 2001 meeting that included then-Coushatta Chairman Lovelin Poncho. (Abramoff charged the tribe $25,000 for the meeting.) With a raft of possible Republican indictments before the mid-term elections, the Coushatta-Abramoff scandal might play a decisive role in determining whether the GOP retains control of Congress.

Current Coushatta council member David Sickey, now 27 years old, took office with the tribe three years ago on a platform of reform.

"We could somewhat sense that it was the genesis of a huge controversy, but we were so involved in creating a package to expose abuse and scandal that we didn't realize the magnitude it would eventually evolve into," he says. "Now it seems almost surreal that it all started here in Elton."

Most of the discussion sparked by the scandal has concerned elected officials' lack of integrity, and the ripe-for-abuse political fundraising system. The story has also resurrected questions about Indian gaming, a multi-billion dollar business with growing influence on state and national economies and governments.