

Apartheid Apologist: Black Jack Abramoff's Early Adventures

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Media Channel - Danny Schechter- This early period in Abramoff's career has been largely ignored in most of the American media. It was the period in which he began building relations with tribal people, a practice he would parlay later becoming a very well compensated lobbyist for corrupt American Indian tribes in the lucrative gambling industry.

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Jack Abramoff's White Man's Burden

Danny Schechter

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Picture the scene.

It was a quiet night in June 1985 in the equatorial heat of Jamba, a small town in the heartland of Angola, the oil and diamond rich African nation that was divided by a bloody civil war for 30 years. Jamba at the time was a base for Jonas Savimbi's Unita movement, a tribal secessionist army bizarrely funded, at the same time, by Communist China and the CIA.

A top-secret meeting was then underway between Savimbi and his boosters led by a young American Republican activist, none other than Jack Abramoff, a man who could bring down the current GOP Administration. He was there representing an organization he founded, the International Freedom Foundation. Abramoff, and others disguised their identities. His code name was 'Pacman.'

Also present, a South African newspaper reports, 'Leaders of the Afghan mujahedin, Nicaraguan contras, Laotian guerrillas and members of the Oliver North American right.' (Could a Bin Laden operative have been there with the CIA-backed Afghan delegation? There's no evidence of that yet.)

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Unita's strongman, the late Jonas Savimbi, who fancied calling himself Dr. Savimbi, was a masterful guerilla fighter who became the darling of the American right wing as it rallied to the cause of Unita's main ally, racist South Africa. Conservatives dubbed him a freedom fighter, heralding him as their Che Guevara. In the end 600,000 people, mostly civilians would die in this bloody conflict, many as result of atrocities perpetuated by Unita. (I reported from Angola in that period and can confirm it was an awful bloodletting with cities like Lubongo destroyed and thousands displaced.)

Abramoff's trip to Angola had been paid for by right-wing New York financier Lewis Lehrman as part of an effort to create a global anti-communist alliance. (Lehrman later fired Abramoff, who would go on to become the most notorious lobbyist in America, for inflating his expense reports, a portent of corrupt practices to come.)

Abramoff, an ultra-orthodox Jew recalled an incident when he left the meeting to pray alone in the bush. "They thought, I was a 'mystic,'" he would later write.

There was nothing mystical about the US policies Abramoff was then covertly advancing.

According to the Wikipedia:

"In 1986, Savimbi was invited by U.S. President Ronald Reagan to the White House. Reagan spoke of UNITA winning 'a victory that electrifies the world.... Equally important, Savimbi was strongly supported by the extremely influential Heritage Foundation. Heritage Foundation foreign policy analyst Michael Johns and other conservatives visited regularly with Savimbi in his clandestine camps in southern Angola and provided the rebel leader with ongoing political and military guidance in his war against the Angolan government.

"Savimbi's U.S.-based supporters ultimately proved successful in convincing the Central Intelligence Agency to channel covert weapons to Savimbi's war against Angola's Marxist government, which greatly intensified the conflict."

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His fascination with Africa would lead to a lobbying contract for the Congo's Mobutu Sese Seko, a Savimbi supporter and then the richest and most corrupt dictator on the continent. Mobutu, critics charged, ran a 'kleptocracy' based on the violent suppression of human rights while Abramoff represented him.

Abramoff would later be accused of becoming a kleptocrat in his own right. Apparently, he never just served others. He was always more ambitious and avaricious than that.

He saw a chance to make a name and big money for himself with the help of apartheid South Africa. Rocked by uprisings in the townships and challenged by the artists who backed a cultural boycott of South Africa's 'Sun City', the top gambling resort and entertainment venue, Apartheid's rulers decided to fight back against the likes of activists, like singer Little Steven Van Zandt, by channeling state funds into media projects they could later deny they were linked with.

Jack Abramoff had actually first visited South Africa in 1983, as head of the College Republicans National Committee (CRNC). South Africa's Mail and Guardian reported on February 10, 2006: 'The IFF was officially headquartered in Washington, where the South Africans were given entrance into the American political establishment by Abramoff and the Young Republicans. But, it was effectively run from Johannesburg' Newsday reported that the Johannesburg office was 'the nerve centre' of IFF operations worldwide.'

Abramoff then enlisted in South Africa's cultural war and suddenly found himself sitting pretty as the head of Hollywood movie studio called Regency Enterprises. The idea was to make anti-communist films that could denigrate the anti-apartheid movement. Poof, Jack became a credited screenwriter.

The movie was 'Red Scorpion' starring the very Aryan-looking Dolph Lundgren. It pictured African liberation fighters as surrogates for Soviet totalitarians. The plot: 'A Russian KGB agent is sent to Africa to kill an anti-Communist black revolutionary.' The tagline: 'He's a human

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killing machine. Taught to stalk. Trained to kill. Programmed to destroy. He's played by their rules... Until now.?

Jack Abramoff's alter ego and fantasy was now on the screen.

The movie was made in South African-occupied Namibia. It was denounced by Hollywood supporters of the cultural boycott like Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee and Robert DeNiro for supporting apartheid. Other critics called it "homoerotic" and "over patriotic." He later executive produced a sequel, "Red Scorpion 2."

Abramoff has a pattern of first denying sleazy practices until forced to admit them. At first, he publicly denied South African financing. This past week the Mail & Guardian quotes one-time apartheid spy Craig Williamson as now admitting that the money came directly from the South African military:

"Among Abramoff's South African projects was the anti-communist film Red Scorpion, made in South African-occupied Namibia and, according to Williamson, funded by the South African military."

Why the military? The newspaper reveals: "The IFF was ostensibly founded as a conservative think-tank, but was in reality part of an elaborate South African military intelligence operation, code-named Operation Babushka. Established to combat sanctions and undermine the African National Congress, it also supported Jonas Savimbi and his rebel Angolan movement, Unita."

The movie was modeled romantically on Savimbi's "War for Freedom" but also riddled with stereotypes and crude propaganda.

Sample exchange: "Colonel Zayas: Are you out of your mind?"

Lt. Nikolai: "No. Just out of bullets. xxxs[Burps]." ([Click here to watch the trailer](#) .)

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Abramoff turned to his connections and procured a Soviet-made WWII-era T-34 tank with a 76mm canon for the final battle sequence.

An amateur reviewer posted an insightful comment on a film website which may have foreseen the off-screen drama that Ambramoff himself is now starring in. ?Looking beyond the mindless action scenes (which, despite the countless guns and explosions), there is a good fable about the possibility of manipulating truth, and how appearance is not always truth.?

Another citizen-reviewer noted, ?Yes, the same man who bribed over 60 congressmen and senators, robbed several native American tribes blind, tried to take out life insurance policies on tribal elders with himself as the beneficiary, and called the Choctaw tribal council 'Monkeys' and 'troglodytes,' had an interesting earlier career.

?He was disqualified from the student government election in his Beverly Hills elementary school for exceeding spending limits. He took over the young Republican movement in college with his schoolmates including Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition, and longtime republican insider Grover Norquist.?

Last week, pictures of Abramoff and President Bush, photos whose existence was first denied by the White House, turned up on the internet. Yes, they knew each other and met several times. Ambramoff claims Karl Rove was his buddy.

Still to come are images of Abramoff on his African ?liberation? safari taking up the white man?s burden in the name of discrediting Nelson Mandela. The African National Congress leader?s freedom was demanded by millions at the time, with the exception of politicians like then Congressman Dick Cheney who voted against a Congressional resolution calling for Mandela?s release from prison. (Cheney also opposed overturning Ronald Reagan?s ban on sanctions against South Africa, a ban Jack Ambramoff personally worked in Hollywood to support as a Pretoria funded agent.)

Don?t you think there must be a photo somewhere of young Jack with South Africa?s apartheid-era President, P.W. ?The Crocodile? Botha. Putting those two presidential trophy shots side by side, Botha on one side, Bush on the other, will complete this connection between the ongoing fight for truth and racial justice and the Bush Administration?s commitment to

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?Abramoff Family Values? (AFW) designed to enrich ?just us.? (The LA Times has since reported that Ambramoff considered Karl Rove a friend.)

RawStory.com which is carrying a version of this report asked Ambramoff?s lawyer about its contentions. His response: a denial.

?Andrew Blum, a spokesman for Abramoff, denied that Abramoff had ever supported apartheid and called any such implications 'false and defamatory.'"

"It is untrue that Jack Abramoff ever supported apartheid," Blum said in an email. "As the media at the time reflected, Mr. Abramoff's involvement in the Washington office of IFF occurred in the mid-1980s, was short-lived, and was when IFF came out against apartheid and for the release of Nelson Mandella. In fact, Mr. Abramoff was criticized at the time in pro-South African government circles for these positions. Mr. Abramoff did no work to advance the agenda of the South African apartheid government."

He added, "Mr. Abramoff's anti-apartheid positions were clear and never contradicted in any forum. Any suggestion, implication or reporting that Mr. Abramoff was ever pro-apartheid or working for the interests of the South African government are false and defamatory."

?**News Dissector? Danny Schechter** edits Mediachannel.org. He was the Executive Producer of the public television series ?South Africa Now? and helped produce the Sun City album with 54 top musicians. Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org