

Casino Jack and the United States of Money

We who live on Capitol Hill can be offended when outsiders understand our local moniker only as a den of appalling pols and the rapacious lobbyists who serve them. Sadly, enough raw material exists to feed that sour impression of a Capitol Hill for sale, and a new documentary proves a particularly blatant exemplar. “Casino Jack and the United States of Money” recounts one of the more egregious episodes of lobbyists run amok, the slimy rise and ignominious fall of Jack Abramoff, champion defiler of our politics.

Anyone who has been in DC the last decade or so and who follows politics at all will have heard of Abramoff and his coterie of hustlers, principally at the downtown law firm of Greenberg-Traurig. Documentarist Alex Gibney has latched on to the Abramoff saga and aimed to give it epic resonance.

Gibney, based in DC, is no cool-headed chronicler of our mores; he is an openly leftist muckraker whose last two films “Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room” and “Taxi to the Dark Side” treated, respectively, the shenanigans of the reviled Houston corporation and the U.S. military’s brutal treatment of an innocent Afghani taxi driver. Mixing a plethora of archive footage, TV clips, punchy music, and damning interview segments, Gibney creates a breathless critique of obvious evil-doers, aiming to unmask them before a stupefied public (the intricate, illusive editing is the worthy work of one Alison Ellwood). The director’s charges are tough and his techniques aren’t subtle, and

persons of a Republican bent should attend a Gibney film expecting the worst.

He has done it again with “Casino Jack,” a film that will have more resonance with local filmgoers because of its ample Washington connections. Here were malfeasance and ethical violations that happened right in our own neighborhood and in the heart of our town.

The film is divided into chapters, with the openers giving a

survey of Abramoff’s early days (a Jewish kid born in Jersey, made in Beverly Hills) when he rose to prominence as an officer and eventual president of the National College Republicans. His glibness (“he could sweet talk a dog off a meat truck,” says one observer), charisma, and ambition are traced over the years as he rises to become a Washington player and a smooth seducer of national lawmakers, mostly Republican.

“Casino Jack” outlines elements of Abramoff’s crass prestige, like the luxury boxes he had at sports venues like FedEx Field, where he could schmooze clients, or the restaurant, “Signatures,” that he once owned on Pennsylvania Avenue (*see photo of Jack in situ above*). The latter, according to Neil Volz, one of his protégés, offered “liberal portions in a conservative setting.”



The core chapters concern his greatest lobbying efforts, smarmy triumphs of our money-greased politics. One episode recounts how he and his firm got rich off sweat-shop Asian labor in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands, aided by Rep. Tom Delay and others. Another has him creating a sham think tank run out of a Rehoboth beach house and “directed” by a clueless local life guard!

Still, the principal area where Jack and Co. made serious money was in courting Native American tribes and their casino operations. His ripping off of several tribal groups is outlined, but no case is more poignant than his crude conning of the small Tigua Tribe of El Paso, a hustle described in some detail.

Gibney tries hard, but the Jack Abramoff story is not epic in its outlook; it is yet another sordid reminder of what money does to our politics, how it corrupts the Republic in mean and disheartening ways. The film’s finale satisfies in that the villain (and several of his colleagues) gets his comeuppance. In 2005, some tribes and his own firm begin to investigate Abramoff’s actions, and *The Washington Post* (in the person of reporter Susan Schmidt) receives tips on his frauds. We get to see him cowed and taking the Fifth before Congress. His crude and revealing e-mails are discovered and unmask him (Abramoff’s voice is intoned by Stanley Tucci). The house of cards collapses, and Jack gets four years in the slammer (he will be out later this year).

Yet “Casino Jack” does not fully satisfy one’s outrage. Abramoff, Gibney concludes, was but one adept player in the rancid game of our politics; but the system remains, little affected by his demise, churning on as before. This film should give political news junkies a kick, and it offers some lively local history to incipient junkies. Most importantly, it may even lead others to a more critical look at how we have come to govern ourselves.

(The film is rated “R” and runs 118 minutes)

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