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McCain's Team of Lobbyists

• BY [JOE CONASON](#) | MAY 20, 2008 | TAGS: [POLITICS](#)[JOHN MCCAIN](#)

Disturbed by troubling connections and unflattering publicity, John McCain has just purged several prominent Washington lobbyists from his presidential campaign. Surely his intentions are laudable, but if Mr. McCain is consistent in ridding the campaign of such compromised people, he will find himself riding lonesome on the Straight Talk Express. That's because nearly all of his advisers, fund-raisers and top staffers have worked on K Street, starting with his campaign manager, Rick Davis, and his senior adviser and spokesman, Charles Black.

From the beginning, the McCain team has been thoroughly infested with representatives of corporate special interests, from the campaign's national co-chairs, finance chairs, policy and political directors, and deputies of all descriptions down to the chairman of "Young Professionals for McCain," who just happens to lobby for Airbus, the European aviation firm that benefited from the Arizona senator's long inquest against Boeing.

Perhaps the senator hasn't been paying attention for the past few decades, for he somehow seems to have surrounded himself with exactly the kind of Washington hustlers he professes to despise. How this happened is a question that Mr. McCain must answer for himself. What must be truly impressive to anyone glancing over the résumés of Messrs. Davis and Black, as well as the lesser members of the McCain entourage, is their magnetic attraction for the most questionable clients in the world.

Consider Mr. Black, a longtime Republican operative whose lobbying activities first drew negative attention during the Reagan administration, when he represented such august figures as Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, and Angolan rebel Jonas Savimbi. Marcos and Mobutu were infamous despots with a penchant for looting their own nation's economies as well as any American aid that came their way, presumably with Mr. Black's assistance. The theft of taxpayer funds by those two crooks eventually mounted into the billions, and they savagely repressed democratic forces with U.S. arms. As for Savimbi, he was merely an authoritarian thug, a Maoist ideologue and, according to some reports, a sometime cannibal.

We can safely assume that Mr. Black never returned any of the stolen blood money that paid for his services. Recently, he has suggested that U.S. government support for those dictatorial regimes somehow justified his profiteering, as if he weren't involved in shoring up that support. Meanwhile, Mr. Davis was toiling in the Reagan White House as a cabinet functionary, where one of his jobs included liaison with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, site of a major domestic looting scandal during those years. When he testified about his role in those events, his recollections of the influence peddling that had given housing contracts to well-connected Republicans were dim at best. But when he left the public payroll, he landed at the lobbying firm of Paul Manafort, who had gotten one of the most profitable of the HUD sweetheart deals for a \$30 million development in New Jersey.

Aside from the usual roster of deep-pocketed corporations paying to have their way with Congress, the

White House and the federal agencies—which horrifies Mr. McCain, lest anybody forget—the McCain advisers have attracted a number of particularly noisome accounts.

For several years, Mr. Davis represented G-TECH, the lottery and gambling conglomerate that has been embroiled in bribery scandals in several countries, including the United States. During that same period, his firm also represented the government of Nigeria, among the most flamboyantly corrupt regimes in the world, at the time under the boot heel of the murderous General Sani Abacha. More recently he has cultivated the business of Oleg Deripaska, the Russian mega-billionaire, who made his fortune by seizing control of Russia's aluminum industry during the violent "Aluminum Wars." That history earned him a reputation as an unscrupulous mafioso and put him on the State Department's visa watch list until certain American lobbyists fixed the problem. According to *The Washington Post*, Mr. Davis arranged at least two meetings in Europe between Mr. Deripaska, a close ally of Russian strongman Vladimir Putin, and Mr. McCain, a critic of Mr. Putin's oligarchical and undemocratic government.

These episodes scarcely begin to describe the careers of Mr. Davis and his colleagues on the McCain team. They've put lipstick on a lot of pigs.

But the question is why, at this late date, Mr. McCain is pretending to be shocked by the "conflicts of interest" in which he stands neck deep, and why he dismisses four or five lobbyists while keeping dozens of others, including his top advisers, because they claim to be "retired" or on "leave of absence" from their business. He knows that a press release won't change the habits of a lifetime in Washington's corrupt corporate culture—but apparently he hopes we will think so.