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McCain Transition Chief Aided Saddam In Lobbying Effort

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William Timmons, the Washington lobbyist who John McCain has named to head his presidential transition team, aided an influence effort on behalf of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to ease international sanctions against his regime.

The two lobbyists who Timmons worked closely with over a five year period on the lobbying campaign later either pleaded guilty to or were convicted of federal criminal charges that they had acted as unregistered agents of Saddam Hussein's government.

During the same period beginning in 1992, Timmons worked closely with the two lobbyists, Samir Vincent and Tongsun Park, on a previously unreported prospective deal with the Iraqis in which they hoped to be awarded a contract to purchase and resell Iraqi oil. Timmons, Vincent, and Park stood to share at least \$45 million if the business deal went through.

Timmons' activities occurred in the years following the first Gulf War, when Washington considered Iraq to be a rogue enemy state and a sponsor of terrorism. His dealings on behalf of the deceased Iraqi leader stand in stark contrast to the views his current employer held at the time.

John McCain strongly supported the 1991 military action against Iraq, and as recently as Sunday described Saddam Hussein as a one-time menace to the region who had "stated categorically that he would acquire weapons of mass destruction, and he would use them wherever he could."

Timmons declined to comment for this story. An office manager who works for him said that he has made it his practice during his public career to never speak to the press. Timmons previously told investigators that he did not know that either Vincent or Park were acting as unregistered agents of Iraq. He also insisted that he did not fully understand just how closely the two men were tied to Saddam's regime while they collaborated.

But testimony and records made public during Park's criminal trial, as well as other information uncovered during a United Nations investigation, suggest just the opposite. Virtually everything Timmons did while working on the lobbying campaign was within days conveyed by Vincent to either one or both of Saddam Hussein's top aides, Tariq Aziz and Nizar Hamdoon. Vincent also testified that he almost always relayed input from the Iraqi aides back to Timmons.

Talking points that Timmons produced for the lobbyists to help ease the sanctions, for example, were reviewed ahead of time by Aziz, Vincent testified in court. Proposals that Timmons himself circulated to U.S. officials as part of the effort were written with the assistance of the Iraqi officials, and were also sent ahead of time with Timmons' approval to Aziz, other records show.

Moreover, there was a major financial incentive at play for Timmons. The multi-million dollar oil deal that he was pursuing with the two other lobbyists would only be possible if their efforts to ease sanctions against Iraq were successful.

Vincent, an Iraqi-born American citizen with whom Timmons worked most closely, pleaded guilty to federal criminal charges in January 2005 that he had acted as an unregistered agent of Saddam Hussein's regime. Tongsun Park, the second lobbyist who Timmons worked closely with, was convicted by a federal jury in July 2006 on charges that he too violated the Foreign Agent Registration Act.

As part of a plea bargain agreement with the Justice Department, Vincent agreed to testify against Park and others in exchange for a reduced prison sentence. He was the government's chief witness against Park during Park's trial. Park was [sentenced to five years in prison](#) after his conviction.

A U.N commission headed by former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker conducted an [exhaustive investigation](#) of the oil-for-food program, in which various individuals were found to have paid illegal kickbacks to Saddam Hussein. The findings of the Volcker Commission detail the roles of Vincent, Park and Timmons in trying to ease the sanctions.

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Timmons testified that he first introduced Vincent to Tongsun Park and encouraged him to hire Park to work on the deal.

At the time Timmons introduced the two men, Park's notorious background was well known:

In the 1970s, Park had admitted to making hundreds of thousands in payments and illegal campaign contributions to U.S. congressmen on behalf of the South Korean government. Park was indicted on 36 counts by a federal grand jury, but fled to South Korea before he could face trial. All of the charges were later dismissed in exchange for Park providing information about which public officials received funds from the South Korean government.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, not long after Timmons suggested that Vincent hire Park to assist their influence, lobbying, and back-channel diplomatic efforts on behalf of Saddam Hussein's government, much of that effort became increasingly bizarre, corrupt, and - on occasion - illegal.

Vincent testified that Park [covertly received millions of dollars](#) from Saddam's government that was supposed to be used to bribe then-U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali to ease international sanctions against Iraq. But both men simply pocketed the money, according to Vincent. (There is no evidence that Boutros Ghali even knew of Iraq's intention to bribe him.)

Investigations by the Justice Department and the Volcker commission disclosed that Park also served as the middleman for a million dollar payment that investigators believed was a bribe for another senior United Nations official. That official in fact admitted receiving the money from Park, but said he did not know that the funds originated with Saddam's regime.

Timmons told federal investigators that he was unaware of these particular activities, and investigators were unable to uncover any evidence to contradict that claim.

Timmons also claimed that he was motivated to push forward with the lobbying campaign with Vincent and Park not only to assist Saddam's regime but also because he believed that his actions would serve U.S. interests, that they would help the people of Iraq obtain needed medicine and food being denied

them by sanctions, and would serve to facilitate a rapprochement of relations between Hussein and the U.S. that would be beneficial to both countries.

But there was a financial incentive in play as well. During the same period, Vincent was hard at work obtaining contracts with Iraq to purchase and resell Iraqi oil allowed under international sanctions; Timmons would have stood to benefit financially from those contracts.

Timmons claimed to investigators that any contracts offered to him, Vincent, and Park would be awarded solely on merit, and had nothing to do with their lobbying efforts.

But Vincent told investigators that their work clearly gave them an inside track. And in other instances, in which Timmons was not involved, Vincent profited from lucrative oil-for-food contracts awarded by Iraq as compensation for his effort to buy influence in the U.S. and at the U.N. for Saddam's regime.

At Park's trial, Vincent testified that he, Park, and Timmons stood to make as much as \$45 million in profits from one particular oil venture with Saddam's regime had it gone forward. Park testified that he was unsure exactly what percentage of the proceeds each of the three men would have personally received. The deal ultimately fell through.

An investigator who worked on the U.N. investigation of the oil-for-food program told me that Timmons clearly should have or did understand that he was the possible recipient of oil contracts from the Iraqi government because of his lobbying and back channel diplomatic efforts on behalf of Saddam: "He would have to be the most naive person in the world to believe that was not the case," the official told me. "I guess William Timmons is just a natural born oilman. He is either deceiving himself to rationalize what he has done or taking the rest of us for fools."

Between 1997 and 2001, according to the Volcker report, Vincent received five such contracts from Saddam's regime.

In his guilty plea agreement with the Justice Department, Vincent admitted: "I received those allocations because of the work I had done on behalf of the Government of Iraq in helping set up the oil-for-food program."

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Samir Vincent was well positioned for the task at hand when he began his influence and back channel diplomacy campaign with the Iraqis; he had been boyhood friends of two of Saddam Hussein's closest advisers, Nizar Hamdoun and Tariq Aziz.

Hamdoun, who died in 2003, was Saddam's foreign minister, and Tariq Aziz had variously served as Baghdad's ambassador to the United States, ambassador to the United States, and Iraq's deputy prime minister.

But Vincent also sought to enlist the help of a Washington insider or lobbyist if his efforts were to have any chance of success.

His initial plan to purchase Iraqi oil through the American Red Cross faced opposition from the U.S. government. Vincent's partner at the time, an American businessman named John Venners, suggested that they needed "help from some people that he knew very well" who "used to be high up in the government." Venners recommended William Timmons.

As Time magazine's Michael Scherer [recently reported](#), Timmons is "a Washington institution," having worked as a senior aide to every Republican president since Richard Nixon. He also serves as chairman emeritus of Timmons and Company, "a small but influential lobbying firm he founded in 1975

shortly after leaving the White House."

According to Vincent's testimony, Timmons immediately opened doors for the Iraqi-American lobbyist. He talked to then-Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger on Vincent's behalf. He also contacted then-Sen. Bob Dole and John Bolton, then-undersecretary of state for international affairs, to discuss Vincent's plan.

In a meeting with U.N. officials, Vincent pressed his case armed with "talking points" that Timmons had written for him. Before using them, Vincent said that he first sent the talking points to Nizaar Hamdoon and Tariq Aziz, with Timmons' approval.

After the meeting, Vincent traveled all the way to Baghdad to report back to Tariq Aziz what had occurred. Later, he had another meeting with Hamdoon and Aziz at the United Nations mission in New York to plan on next steps. Vincent testified he made formal minutes of that meeting, typed them up, and then traveled to Washington to personally give them to Timmons. This was routine practice as Vincent, Timmons, and the Iraqis worked together.

Timmons himself was apparently loathe to meet with Hamdoon or Aziz personally. But virtually the entire time they worked together, Vincent would relay to Timmons what the Iraqis had to say and vice versa.

After Vincent's first meeting with U.N. officials, Aziz and Hamdoon suggested that something called a "non-paper" be presented the next time Vincent met with the same officials. Non-papers are diplomatic communications in which parties can propose positions in writing, but do not have to fear if they leak to the public or press, because they do not officially represent positions of the government.

At the request of Aziz and Hamdoon, Timmons authored the non-paper which Vincent could rely on for that second meeting. Both Aziz and Hamdoon also reviewed the paper before Vincent used it.

On March 15, 1995, Timmons wrote a memo (which is a matter of public record as an exhibit in the case) advocating that they and the Iraqis should enlist the assistance of U.S. oil companies to make their case.

Timmons once again apparently understood that his audience was the Iraqi government. Vincent testified that Timmons gave him the memo knowing that the document was "supposed to solicit the thoughts of the Iraqi government, if this is something they would seriously consider." Vincent dutifully passed Timmons' memo on to Nizaar Hamdoon, he testified.

Weeks later, in April 1995, Vincent was summoned to Iraq to meet with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad.

As to Timmons' claims that he kept his distance from Vincent and Park and did not know much about what they and the Iraqis were up to, this exchange between a federal prosecutor and Vincent once again suggests otherwise:

Q: And when you returned to the United States, did you tell anyone about your visit with Saddam Hussein?

A: I told Bill Timmons and Tongsun Park.

Q: Why did you tell Bill Timmons about your visit with Saddam?

A: To let him know that we were talking to the leader of Iraq, and in essence we have access and assure him that any messages we were relaying between Iraqi and Tariq Aziz and anyone else, it was being transmitted to the president, Saddam Hussein, in Iraq.

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Presciently, *Time's* Scherer noted that McCain's own staffers had early concerns that appointing Timmons could prove detrimental to the Arizona Senator's presidential ambitions:

His [lobbying] registrations include work on a number of issues that have become flashpoints in the presidential campaign. He has registered to work on bills that deal with the regulations of troubled mortgage lenders Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, a bill to provide farm subsidies and bills that regulate domestic oil-drilling.

By tapping Timmons, McCain has turned to one of Washington's steadiest and most senior inside players to guide him in the event of a victory -- but also to someone who represents the antithesis of the kind of outside-of-Washington change he has recently been promising. One Republican familiar with the process said the decision to involve Timmons could become a political liability for the campaign's reformist image, especially in the wake of the controversies over the lobbying backgrounds of other McCain staffers, including campaign manager Rick Davis. "It's one more blind spot for Rick Davis and John McCain," the person said.

Timmons' work to relax international sanctions against Iraq, as well as to benefit financially from Saddam Hussein's regime, may be another such flashpoint.

The Volcker report makes clear that when Timmons first got involved with Vincent and the Iraqis, the lure of millions of dollars was at least one incentive. By early 1992, Timmons and his associates were already "pursu[ing] the purchase of sale of Iraqi oil and the exploration by a consortium of companies of the Manjoon field in Iraq," the report said.

According to the report, the venture was dependent on Vincent's belief "that sanctions against Iraq would be lifted immediately and that the Iraqi government might grant a long-term concession to an American oil company."

Later, when Timmons pressed the case even more aggressively that sanctions against Saddam's regime be eased, he, Vincent and Park hoped to profit as well, according to the Volcker report. "Continuing through 1994 and 1995, Mr. Vincent and Mr. Park, along with Mr. Timmons and others, persisted in their efforts to establish a foothold in the Iraqi oil business," the report stated.

At one point, Timmons even boasted to investigators that it was his ideas that later became the basis for the United Nations' oil-for-food program.

Under that program, the United Nations allowed Iraq to sell its oil under U.N. supervision, with the proceeds placed in U.N. escrow accounts to buy food, medicine, and other humanitarian goods for the Iraqi people.

However, a major flaw in the program was that Saddam Hussein's regime was allowed to play a role in the selection of oil companies awarded contracts. Because of lax oversight of the program, Saddam's government was able to demand that foreign oil companies -- including American ones -- provide more than \$1.7 billion in kickbacks to his regime.

One of the most outspoken critics in the U.S. Senate of the oil-for-food program was John McCain:

"We need to have a full and complete cooperation on the part of the U.N. about this whole oil-for-food program, which stinks to high heaven," McCain [told Fox News](#) in Dec. 2004. "We're talking about billions and billions of dollars here that were diverted for many wrong purposes. And this is an example of corruption.

"And by the way, it's an argument, maybe a small one, but maybe an argument that justifies our action in Iraq. Because clearly the sanctions and the framework of those sanctions was completely eroded."

Additional reporting by Patrick B. Anderson.