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First Photo of Bush and Abramoff  
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White House had initially said there was no record of disgraced lobbyist at 2001 meeting.

big picture



President Bush is shown at a meeting in 2001 with Chief Raul Garza of the Kickapoo tribe of Texas. In the background at left is the lobbyist Jack Abramoff. (Photo: The White House)

Just how close was the relationship between the White House and disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff? The Bush Administration again faced questions about those ties after an e-mail Abramoff sent a journalist friend surfaced last week in which Abramoff wrote that he had met President Bush almost a dozen times over the past five years, and even received an invitation to the President's Crawford, Texas ranch along with other large political donors. Bush "has one of the best memories of any politician I have ever met," Abramoff mused in the e-mail last month, adding that, He "saw me in almost a dozen settings, and joked with me about a bunch of things, including details of my kids." The White House, however, has continued to assert that the President had no recollection of ever meeting Abramoff. When TIME reported in January that it had viewed unpublished photographs of Abramoff with Bush, aides responded that the pictures meant nothing since the President is photographed with thousands of supporters and White House visitors every year.

Now, finally, the first such photo has come to light. It shows a bearded Abramoff in the background as Bush greets an Abramoff client, Raul Garza, who was then the chairman of the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas; Bush senior advisor Karl Rove looks on. The photograph was provided to TIME by Mr. Garza. The meeting took place in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House on May 9, 2001. Told about the photograph in January, the White House said it had no record that Abramoff was present at the meeting. Shown the photograph today, White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan said the White House had still found no record of Abramoff's presence but confirmed that it is Abramoff in the picture. McClellan told TIME: "The

president has taken countless, tens of thousands of pictures at home and abroad over the last five years. As we've said previously a photo like this has no relevance to the Justice Department's investigation (of Abramoff)."

This meeting, however, was a relatively small gathering attended by some two dozen people, including Garza and another Indian tribal leader who was Abramoff's client. At least two tribes, the Coshatta of Louisiana and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw, contributed \$25,000 each to the anti-tax group Americans for Tax Reform, which is headed by Grover Norquist, a well-known conservative ally of the White House. Garza, who is also known by his Indian name, Makateonenodua.com, meaning "black buffalo," is under federal indictment for allegedly embezzling more than \$300,000 from his tribe.

Talking about the photo, Abramoff has told friends, "I was standing right next to the window and after the picture was taken, the President came over and shook hands with me, and we chatted and joked." A photograph of that scene as described by Abramoff was shown to TIME two weeks ago. Abramoff's lawyers have said that their client has long had photographs of himself with Bush, but that he has no intention of releasing any of them. Abramoff would not comment on the matter.

Benigno Fitial, the governor of the Northern Mariana Islands, told TIME he attended the 2001 meeting as well. Then an Abramoff client, the governor recalled asking the President a question about tax policy as part of a discussion among the small group after Bush had given a short speech on the subject. Fitial was seeking low-tax and relaxed labor regulations for the Northern Marianas at the time. Fitial said he used a photograph of himself with President Bush taken at the meeting in his campaign for governor.

Fitial recalled that the President was "very gracious" at the session. "He knew quite a few of the people in the room; I know that because he called them by their first name. The responses showed that the President was no stranger to these people, he said. "And the response was very warm on both sides."