

Former congressional chief of staff pleads guilty to corruption crimes

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

William J. Heaton, 28, former chief of staff for Congressman Robert W. Ney, pleaded guilty today before U.S. District Judge Ellen Segal Huvelle for the District of Columbia to a one-count information charging him with conspiracy to commit honest services mail and wire fraud, Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher for the Criminal Division announced today.

Neil Volz, left, poses with Ralph Reed, Paul Vinovich, Robert Ney, William Heaton, David Safavian, Michael Williams, Alex Abramoff and Jack Abramoff in front of the chartered plane that took them to Scotland in August 2002. Photo Credit: U.S. District Court

According to court documents, beginning in September 2001, Heaton was employed by former Congressman Ney, serving as the executive assistant for Ney and later as his chief of staff. Ney was a Congressman representing the 18th District of Ohio from 1995 until he resigned last fall before being sentenced to 30 months in prison on corruption charges. In Ney's office, Heaton's duties included managing Ney's office personnel and approving on behalf of Ney the staff's receipt and use of tickets to sporting and entertainment events.

During his plea, Heaton admitted that he joined a conspiracy with Ney and others beginning in August 2002 and continuing through April 2004, wherein he and Ney corruptly solicited and accepted a stream of things of value from Jack Abramoff, Abramoff's lobbyists, and a foreign businessman, in exchange for agreeing to take and taking official action to benefit Abramoff, his clients, and the foreign businessman. The named co-conspirators in the charge to which Heaton pleaded guilty include Ney, Abramoff, and Ney's former chief of staff Neil Volz, all of whom previously have pleaded guilty.

"Our citizens are entitled to know that their public servants are making official decisions based upon the best interests of the people they represent and not based upon their own financial interests," Assistant Attorney General Fisher. "The Justice Department will protect the integrity of our government institutions and processes by continuing to aggressively investigate and prosecute public corruption wherever it is found."

"The FBI has made combating public corruption at all levels of government one of its top investigative priorities, because American taxpayers deserve honesty from public officials and employees," said Assistant Director Chip Burrus of the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division. "No corrupt public servant is exempt from FBI scrutiny. We will continue to pursue those like Will Heaton who sell their integrity at the public's expense."

Heaton admitted that he and Ney corruptly solicited and accepted things of value from Abramoff and his lobbyists-including international and domestic trips, meals and drinks, concert and sporting tickets, and substantial campaign contributions and in-kind contributions such as free fund-raisers for Ney-with the intent to be influenced and induced to take official actions. Heaton admitted that Ney, with Heaton's knowing assistance, took and agreed to take official actions benefiting Abramoff, his lobbyists, and their clients, including supporting legislation at Abramoff's request and contacting executive branch agencies to influence those agencies at Abramoff's request.

Heaton also admitted that he and Ney accepted thousands of dollars worth of gambling chips from a foreign businessman who was hoping to sell U.S.-made airplanes and airplane parts in a foreign country. Heaton admitted that he helped Ney conceal some of the money Ney had received, storing the money for Ney in a safe in Ney's Congressional Office and periodically opening the safe at Ney's request so that Ney could withdraw funds.

These cases are being prosecuted by trial attorneys Mary K. Butler, M. Kendall Day, and James A. Crowell IV of the Public Integrity Section, headed by Acting Section Chief Edward C. Nucci of the Criminal Division. The case was investigated by a task force of federal agents including special agents of the FBI, the Department of the Interior Office of the Inspector General, the General Services Administration Office of the Inspector General, and the Criminal Investigation branch of the Internal Revenue Service. The investigation has received assistance from the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Florida. The broader investigation into the lobbying activities of Jack Abramoff is being conducted by federal agents from the above-named agencies as well as prosecutors in the Public Integrity and Fraud sections of the Criminal Division and prosecutors in the Criminal Tax Section of the Tax Division.

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