J. Steven Griles did the crime but doesn't want to do the time

by Bill_Berkowitz

Former Interior Department Deputy Secretary who pleaded guilty earlier in connection with Jack Abramoff looking for 'sentence' of working for anti-environmental group instead of five years in the pokey

J. Steven Griles J. Steven Griles was convicted earlier this year of withholding information from the Senate Indian Affairs Committee in 2005 about his meeting Jack Abramoff. Facing a possible five year jail sentence, Griles has enlisted a small army of the well-connected who are petitioning the sentencing Judge for leniency, while Griles himself is asking for community service -- part of which time would be served working with the American Recreation Coalition and the Walt Disney Company.

Griles is scheduled for sentencing on June 26. The career lobbyist is the second-highest-level Bush administration official to be caught up in the ongoing Department of Justice investigation of former Republican Party uber-lobbyist, the currently imprisoned Jack Abramoff. Griles, the former Interior Deputy Secretary who, according to SourceWatch, "oversaw the Bush administration's push to open more public lands to energy development," doesn't think he deserves jail time.

Evidently this is one situation in which Griles prefers not to follow Abramoff's lead.

In an effort to avoid doing time, Griles and his legal team have developed a two-pronged strategy: Line up a host of A-listers to send letters to D.C. District Judge Ellen Huvelle seeking leniency; and personally petition the judge to be sentenced to a fine, three months home confinement, and 500 hours of community service with the American Recreation Coalition (ARC), a Washington-based non-profit organization formed in 1979, and the Walt Disney Company.

"It's not difficult to imagine that Griles may soon be working for the ARC," said Scott Silver, the executive director of Wild Wilderness, an Oregon-based grassroots environmental organization who has been tracking these matters for years. "It is, after all, a perfect match-up since they already enjoy the benefits of what has been more than a 20 year working relationship."

Griles "was involved in efforts to help two of Abramoff's clients -- the Louisiana Coushatta tribe and the Saginaw Chippewa tribe of Michigan -- fend off casino proposals from rival tribes and may have done so while engaged in employment negotiations with Abramoff, recent news reports have said. Griles has said through spokespeople that he did not play a major role in endeavors to aid the tribes," The Hill's Josephine Hearn has reported.

"Although Griles initially denied doing any favors for Abramoff's casino-owning Indian tribe clients, court records show that Griles inserted himself into several casino cases at Interior," Greenwire's Dan Berman recently pointed out. "In March, Griles pleaded guilty to withholding information from the Senate Indian

Affairs Committee in 2005 about his meeting Abramoff through Italia Federici, president of the Council of Republicans for Environmental Advocacy (CREA). Griles was dating Federici at the time." Earlier this month, Federici pleaded guilty to tax and perjury charges and agreed to cooperate with the government's wide-ranging Abramoff probe.

According to TPMMuckraker.com, the prosecutors sentencing memo pointed out "how Griles was Abramoff's man in Interior, providing a constant stream of confidential information valuable to Abramoff's tribal clients. In return, Abramoff helped Griles' many lady friends: channeling $500,000 into ... Federici's right-wing group, the Council of Republicans for Environmental Advocacy, and interviewing two others for possible jobs with Abramoff's lobbying firm..."

In "Crimes Against Nature," published in the December 11, 2003 issue of Rolling Stone, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. detailed some of Griles' activities: "During the first Reagan administration, Griles worked directly under James Watt at Interior, where he helped the coal industry evade prohibitions against mountaintop-removal strip mining." In 1989, "Griles left government to work as a mining executive and then as a lobbyist with National Environmental Strategies, a Washington, D.C., firm that represented the National Mining Association and Dominion Resources, one of the nation's largest power producers."

"When Griles got his new job at Interior, the National Mining Association hailed him as 'an ally of the industry.' It's bad enough that a former mining lobbyist was put in charge of regulating mining on public land. But it turns out that Griles is still on the industry's payroll. In 2001, he sold his client base to his partner Marc Himmelstein for four annual payments of $284,000, making Griles, in effect, a continuing partner in the firm."

"Because Griles was an oil and mining lobbyist, the Senate made him agree in writing that he would avoid contact with his former clients as a condition of his confirmation. Griles has nevertheless repeatedly met with former coal clients to discuss new rules allowing mountaintop mining in Appalachia and destructive coal-bed methane drilling in Wyoming. He also met with his former oil clients about offshore leases. These meetings prompted Sen. Joseph Lieberman to ask the Interior Department to investigate Griles. With Republicans in control of congressional committees, no subpoenas have interrupted the Griles scandals."

Dan Berman pointed out that "The felony charge could land Griles in prison for a maximum five years and carry a $250,000 fine. Justice Department attorneys recommended a 10-month sentence. Half of that would be served in a federal prison, according to DOJ's nonbinding recommendation to the court." In a follow-up piece dated June 18, Berman reported that "the head of the American Recreation Coalition said the motorized recreation group made no monetary or future employment promises to Griles in connection with his unusual request to serve community service with an ARC-run nonprofit group associated with Interior and corporations including the Walt Disney Co."

91 letters supporting leniency

Then, there are the letters supporting Griles. "The 91 letters ... reflect his friendships and contacts made through an extensive career in government and industry, including three former Interior secretaries and a litany of senior former government officials and industry executives," Berman pointed out.

"The reality of Steve Griles is in many ways different from the public perception," wrote former Interior Secretary Gale Norton. "His powerful size and bearing seem intimidating, but those who know him realize he is a compassionate and caring person. He helped co-workers who were struggling. He was encouraging and upbeat when people got discouraged."

Norton added: "Many men would have difficulty working with a woman as a superior, especially a woman he had once outranked. Steve instead was supportive and encouraging. We had one of the best, if not the best, working relationships of any secretary and deputy secretary in the administration."

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter (R) wrote about riding horses with Griles in Idaho and Washington's Rock Creek Park. "We have shared many trails, and I have come to recognize that he is a genuine man who is proud of his service to the people of our nation," Otter wrote.

Rep. Barbara Cubin (R-Wyo.) said that Griles' "voice now strains under the sorrow and regret he bears for his

infraction. I believe a sentence of community service will benefit this nation much more than will his imprisonment."

Tom Sansonetti, former assistant attorney general for the environment and natural resources division, and a rumored nominee to replace the late Wyoming Republican Senator Craig Thomas, wrote that "Steve is the consummate public servant. He took on huge, complicated, and often unpopular, tasks for Secretary Norton within the Interior building, such as the complex and high-profiled Cobell case involving the management of Indian Trust Fund monies."

According to Berman, "Sansonetti's successor was Sue Ellen Wooldridge, who married Griles on March 26. Wooldridge resigned in January amid news reports she purchased a South Carolina vacation home with Griles and a ConocoPhillips lobbyist, months before DOJ and the company agreed to settle charges it violated the Clean Air Act."

Among the other 91 requests for leniency include letters from Reagan-era Interior secretaries Don Hodel and William Clark; Craig Manson, former assistant Interior secretary for fish, wildlife and parks; Dan Kish, senior adviser to House Natural Resources Committee ranking member Don Young (R-Alaska); Bill Horn, a Reagan-era assistant Interior secretary and lobbyist; former U.S. EPA acting Administrator Marianne Horinko; Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works John Paul Woodley; James Cason, Interior associate deputy secretary; Ann Klee, former U.S. EPA general counsel and former counselor to Norton; Bennett Raley, former assistant Interior secretary for water and science; Dale Hall, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service and Derrick Crandall, president and executive director of the American Recreation Coalition.

Derrick Crandall's rising star

"In the late 70s, Derrick Crandall was a relative unknown, working for the snowmobile industry and lobbying for snowmobile access in Yellowstone," Scott Silver told Media Transparency in an e-mail interview. In 1981, he became the first President of the American Recreation Coalition, a 'wise-use' organization created two years earlier in response to the gas-crisis of 1979. "The purpose of the ARC was to lobby in support of fuel for motorized recreation," Silver pointed out. When Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981, Crandall's profile was elevated as he became one of the most influential lobbyist in the nation working on Outdoor Recreation issues.

Crandall's stock rose further when he was chosen to serve on Reagan's President's Commission on Americans Outdoors from 1985-1987 -- a commission that Silver said "basically set a new direction for outdoor management policy and was intended to bring about the commercialization, privatization and motorization of recreational opportunities on America's public lands; the corporate takeover of nature and the Disneyfication of the wild."

During this time then vice president George Herbert Walker Bush and Crandall became close friends: "Crandall took Bush on camping trips in motor homes provided by ARC's sister organization, the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association -- the same organization that outfitted George W. Bush and Dick Cheney with motor homes for their 2000 election campaign," Silver added.

Over the course of the past two and a half decades the American Recreation Coalition evolved from being a shill for the petroleum industry to being the most powerful, influential and successful outside force now shaping recreation policy on federally managed public lands, including the national parks. When National Park management policies came under fire last year and efforts were made to make the parks friendlier to motorized recreation, including more snowmobiles in Yellowstone, the ARC led the charge.

Serving the interests of the motorized recreation industry, other commercial recreation entities and the tourism industry, the ARC seeks to radically transform the management of public lands and to turn outdoor recreation into a chain of products, goods and services. The long tradition of people using public lands to adventure on their own and to interact with the natural world is being replaced by land managers and their recreation industry "partners" who sell pre-packaged experiences; experiences compared to a those that can be had at Disneyland.

Griles looking to pay his debt to society by working with ARC and Disney

According to Dan Berman, "Griles' legal team has suggested that half of the community service would be with 'Wonderful Outdoor World' in the position of national counselor and strategic planning coordinator. In that post, Griles would develop public and private partnerships among federal land agencies, the Disney Company and the American Recreation Coalition, as well as raise money and conduct outreach to the government and media. The other half of his community service would focus on 'Operation Coaches and Warriors,' to assist injured veterans of the Iraq war.""While he may have made some mistakes ... we're always willing to help people get back on the right side of life," Derrick added.

In a February 2006 story titled "Who's Ruining Our National Parks?' Vanity Fair contributing editor Michael Shnayerson pointed out that Crandall's ARC "calls itself the voice of a $250 billion industry, from snowmobilers to Jet Skiers, mountain bikers to equestrians. Top Interior politicals, including Gale Norton and Assistant Secretary Lynn Scarlett, regularly attend ARC's annual meetings to receive awards and give talks about opening up the parks."

"Wonderful Outdoor World is an ARC/Disney co-production," Scott Silver told Media Transparency. "The idea is to create a new constituency that will speak in support of ARC's concept of a Disneyfied Great Outdoors." To accomplish their goals, ARC and Disney have "created a frame for this constituency," claiming that it is "obese, inner-city kids who are addicted to videos and who, unless turned into wildness consumers, will surely succumb to diabetes."

"This frame has been very effective," Silver pointed out. "Simply stated, the ARC and Disney have no use of the traditional conservationist or traditional outdoorsman frame/mindset. They are in the business of selling consumable, commodified recreation. Traditionalists are not consumers and so the industry has set about to reinvent the entire concept of outdoor recreation. The industry seeks to make public lands more like theme parks saying that theme parks and structured/Disneyfied recreation is what these kids crave."

For more than two decades, J. Steven Griles "served as a representative of extractive industry, while for the past 25 years, the American Recreation Coalition has worked behind the scenes to turn outdoor recreation into an extractive industry," Silver pointed out.

The ARC's Crandall is first and foremost a longtime anti-environment activist, Silver said. "He's testified before congress a number of times in support of drilling the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; he's been on the board of directors of such 'wise-use' organizations as the Coalition for Vehicle Choice, the Foundation for Clean Air Progress, and the Sports Utility Vehicle Owners of America; he has long fought against efforts to raise gas-mileage (CAFE) standards; and has maintained that global warming is either a fraud or should not be taken seriously."

According to Silver, "Griles is a convicted felon and an enemy of public lands, while Crandall is a powerful lobbyist and an enemy of public lands. It is revealing that Griles has asked the sentencing judge to allow him to work for Crandall instead of going to prison. It is also revealing that Crandall, while making no longterm promises to Griles, made this same request of the judge."

"What is most difficult for me to believe is that the specific ARC programs and initiatives upon which Griles would be working are not generally understood to be components within the ARC's ongoing, anti-environmental agenda," Silver added. "Those pleading on Griles' behalf -- Congresswoman Cubin, Former Interior Secretaries Norton and Hodel, long-time motorized recreation lobbyist Horn and others --

know more about the ARC and its programs than does the general public. Will Griles and his anti-environmental partners have the last laugh?"

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