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In March, when the U.S. State Department announced its new global survey of human rights, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that the report demonstrated America's commitment to civil liberties, the rule of law, and a free press. "We are recommitting ourselves to stand with those courageous men and women who struggle for their freedom and their rights," she said. "And we are recommitting ourselves to call every government to account that still treats the basic rights of its citizens as options rather than, in President Bush's words, the non-negotiable demands of human dignity."

Flipping through the report, however, one cannot help but notice how many of the countries that flout "the non-negotiable demands of human dignity" seem to have negotiated themselves significant support from the U.S. government, whether military assistance (Egypt, Colombia), development aid (Azerbaijan, Nigeria), expanded trade opportunities (Angola, Cameroon), or official Washington visits for their leaders (Equatorial Guinea, Kazakhstan). The granting of favorable concessions to dictatorial regimes is a practice hardly limited to the current administration: Bill Clinton came into office having said that China's access to American markets should be tied to improved human rights - specifically its willingness to "recognize the legitimacy of those kids that were carrying the Statue of Liberty" at Tiananmen Square - but left having helped Beijing attain its long-cherished goal of Permanent Most Favored Nation trade status. Jimmy Carter put the promotion of human rights at the heart of his foreign policy, yet he cut deals for South American generals and Persian Gulf monarchs in much the same fashion as his successor, Ronald Reagan.

How is it that regimes widely acknowledged to be the world's most oppressive nevertheless continually win favors in Washington? In part, it is because they often have something highly desired by the United States that can be leveraged to their advantage, be it natural resources, vast markets for trade and investment, or general geostrategic importance. But even the best-endowed regimes need help navigating the shoals of Washington, and it is their great fortune that, for the right price, countless lobbyists are willing to steer even the foulest of ships.

American lobbyists have worked for dictators since at least the 1930s, when the Nazi government used a proxy firm called the German Dye Trust to retain the public-relations specialist Ivy Lee.



Ivy Lee whose portfolio also included the Rockefellers

Exposure of Lee's deal led Congress to pass the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 (FARA), which required foreign lobbyists to register their contracts with the Justice Department. The idea seemed to be that with disclosure, lobbyists would be too embarrassed to take on immoral or corrupt clients, but this assumption predictably proved to be naive. Edward J. von Kloborg III, now deceased, for years made quite a comfortable living by representing men such as Saddam Hussein of Iraq (whose government's gassing of its Kurdish population he sought to justify) and Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (for whose notoriously crooked regime he helped win American foreign aid). Two other von Kloborg contracts - for Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania and Samuel Doe of Liberia - were terminated, quite literally, when each was murdered by his own citizens. In the 1990s, after Burma's military government arrested the future Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi and cracked down on the pro-democracy movement she led, the firm of Jefferson Waterman International signed on to freshen up the Burmese image.

Although there are distinct limits to what they can achieve, lobbyists are the crucial conduit through which pariah regimes advance their interests in Washington. "It's like the secret handshake that gets you into the lodge," as one former lobbyist told me. Occasionally, firms will achieve spectacular successes for a client: one particularly remarkable piece of lobbyist image management, for example, occurred in the mid-1980s, when the firm of Black, Manafort, Stone & Kelly helped refashion Jonas Savimbi, a murderous, demented Angolan rebel leader backed

by the apartheid regime in South Africa, as a valiant anti-communist "freedom fighter." Savimbi visited Washington on numerous occasions, where the lobby shop had him ferried about by limousine to meetings with top political leaders, conservative groups, and TV networks. Black, Manafort checked repeated threats by members of Congress to cut off aid to Savimbi's rebel group, which was burning and raping its way through Angola with the help of American taxpayers.

Generally, though, lobbyists' victories are more discreet. In 2004 six former members of Congress served as "election observers" in Cameroon and offered an upbeat assessment of President Paul Biya's overwhelming reelection victory, which a local Roman Catholic cardinal described as "surrounded by fraud." It turned out that the firm of Patton Boggs, which worked for the Cameroonian government, had arranged the trip of allegedly independent observers, whose expenses were paid by the Biya regime.



Patton Boggs Washington Headquarters

Between 1999 and 2000, the Carmen Group received more than \$1 million from the government of Kazakhstan to help "establish President [Nursultan] Nazarbayev as one of the foremost emerging leaders of the New World." The lobby shop sent four writers - syndicated columnist Georgie Anne Geyer, Providence Journal associate editor Philip Terzian, R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr. of The American Spectator, and Scott Hogenson of the Conservative News Service - on all-expenses-paid trips to Kazakhstan, and upon their return all wrote stories, ranging from critical but sympathetic to slavishly fawning, which the Carmen Group circulated on Capitol Hill.[1]

The U.S. General Accounting Office estimated in 1990 that less than half of foreign lobbyists who should register under FARA actually do so, and there is no evidence that matters have improved. In theory, violators can be heavily fined and even sent to prison, but almost no one has been prosecuted for ignoring the act, so there are few risks for non-compliance. Those firms that do register generally reveal little information beyond the names of their clients, the fees they pay, and limited information about whom they contact. Because disclosure requirements are so lax, it is nearly impossible to monitor the activities of foreign lobbyists. What little knowledge we do have of lobbyist-orchestrated diplomacy - including most of the projects discussed above - has been gleaned not from FARA filings but from serendipitous revelations or investigative reporting.

Which leaves Americans to wonder: Exactly what sorts of promises do these firms make to foreign governments? What kind of scrutiny, if any, do they apply to potential clients? How do they orchestrate support for their clients? And how much of their work is visible to Congress and the public, and hence subject to oversight? To shed light on these questions, I decided to approach some top Washington lobbying firms myself, as a potential client, to see whether they would be willing to burnish the public image of a particularly reprehensible regime.

The first step was to select a suitably distasteful would-be client. Given that my first pick, North Korea, seemed too reviled to be credible, I settled on the only slightly less Stalinist regime of Turkmenistan. Until his sudden death last December, President-for-Life Saparmurat Niyazov built a personality cult that outdid that of any modern leader except possibly Kim Jong Il. High school students were required to study The Ruhnama, Niyazov's book of personal and spiritual wisdom, described on its official website as being "on par with the Bible and the Koran." The self-declared "Turkmenbashi," or "Leader of all Ethnic Turkmens," Niyazov had his image plastered on billboards and buildings across the country, as well as on the national currency, salt packets, and vodka bottles. He named after himself not only a town but an entire month of the year (the one we unenlightened non-Turkmen still call January). Any opposition to the Turkmen government is considered to be treason, and thousands of political dissidents have been imprisoned. In 2004 a man seeking permission to hold a peaceful demonstration was sent to a psychiatric hospital for two years.

Following Niyazov's demise, Minister of Health Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, the Turkmenbashi's personal dentist, became acting president. [2] He had been responsible, according to the BBC, for implementing Niyazov's 2004 reform of the health service, "which many observers have blamed for its near collapse." Berdymukhamedov was confirmed as president in an election held in February - he ran against five other candidates, all from the ruling party, and won 89 percent of the vote - in a balloting that he described as being held "on a democratic basis that has been laid by the great [late] leader," but which just about everyone else deemed to be a sham. ("[H]is victory was always certain ... and all official structures worked to ensure the outcome," the International Crisis Group said of Berdymukhamedov's triumph at the polls.) In an early interview after becoming president, he said that Niyazov was his role model; as for democracy, he said, "This tender substance cannot be imposed by applying ready imported models. It can be only carefully nurtured by using the wise national experience and traditions of previous generations." He has allowed two new Internet cafes to open in Ashgabat, but business has reportedly been poor, perhaps due to the soldiers posted at the doorways or to the hourly fee, which runs about \$10, more than the average Turkmen's daily income.



Turkmenistan Presidential Palace

I would have difficulty passing for Turkmen, I knew, so rather than approaching the firms as a representative of the government itself, I instead would be a consultant for "The Maldon Group," a mysterious (and fictitious) firm that claimed to have a financial stake in improving Turkmenistan's public image. We were, my story ran, a group of private investors involved in the export of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Ukrainian and other Eastern European markets. We felt it would strengthen our business position in Turkmenistan if we could convey to American policymakers and journalists just how heady were the reforms being plotted by the Berdymukhamedov government.[3]

If flacking for Turkmenistan did not in itself trouble the lobbying firms, my description of The Maldon Group was designed to raise a number of bright red flags. Turkmenistan has vast reserves of natural gas, from which it earns about \$2 billion per year in export revenues, but the whole business has been marked by flagrant corruption - as can be ascertained very quickly by anyone who cares to perform a Google search. A 2006 study by London-based Global Witness reported that Niyazov kept billions of dollars in gas revenues under his effective control in overseas accounts. "Perhaps the murkiest and most complex aspect of the Turkmen-Ukraine gas trade," the report went on to say, is the role of the intermediary companies that have inserted themselves for more than a decade between Turkmenistan, Russia, Ukraine and Europe. These companies have often come out of nowhere, parlaying tiny amounts of start-up capital into billion-dollar deals. Their ultimate beneficial ownership has been hidden behind complex networks of trusts, holding companies and nominee directors and there is almost no public information about where their profits go.

Before approaching the lobbying firms, I made a few minimal preparations. I printed up some Maldon Group business cards, giving myself the name "Kenneth Case" and giving the firm an address at a large office building in London, on Cavendish Square. I purchased a cell phone with a London number. I had a website created for The Maldon Group - just a home page with contact information - and an email account for myself. Then, in mid-February, soon after Berdymukhamedov's ascent, I began contacting various lobbying firms by email, introducing my firm and explaining that we were eager to improve relations between the "newly-elected government of Turkmenistan" and the United States. We required the services of a firm, I said, that could quickly enact a "strategic communications" plan to help us. I hoped that the firms might be willing to meet with me at the end of the month, during a trip I had planned to Washington.

At around three on a pleasantly warm February afternoon, Barry Schumacher, a senior vice president at [APCO Associates](#) ushered me into a conference room at the firm's downtown Washington office, near the intersection of 12th and H Streets N.W. Accompanying me was "Ricardo," a Spanish-born Maldon Group consultant (in actuality, a friend I had recruited to come along, since it seemed unlikely that a firm like mine would send a single associate to meet with potential lobbying firms). APCO was the first firm I had contacted, because it was such a natural candidate to represent Turkmenistan: it has experience working not just on behalf of authoritarian regimes in general - the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha in Nigeria, for example, which employed the firm in 1995, the same year it hanged nine democracy activists - but for Caspian regimes in particular, having done P.R. work for the oil-rich kleptocracy of Azerbaijan.

APCO, Schumacher had written eagerly to me by email, had "worked on image, policy, foreign investment and reputation issues for a host of governments." He touted the firm's "key professionals," among them former members of Congress and former administration officials. In a follow-up note, he did ask if I might provide a bit more information about The Maldon Group, since, for obvious reasons, he hadn't been able to discover anything about it. "We prefer to be discreet due to the sensitivity of our business," I replied. Schumacher understood; he even volunteered that APCO would be "more than willing to sign a confidentiality agreement." I assured him that if we were to proceed to the stage of contract negotiations, The Maldon Group would "certainly be able to satisfy any reasonable concerns" about our ability to pay, but until then, I wrote, "we're not prepared to share much more than what I've already told you at the level of preliminary conversations." To which Schumacher promptly replied, "I understand, and this is not unusual for us."

Now, as Ricardo and I entered the meeting room, three of Schumacher's colleagues rose from their seats around a conference table to greet us. There was Elizabeth Jones, a former assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasia until 2005 and an ex-ambassador to Kazakhstan; Robert Downen, a professorial type in a shirt and tie who had previously served as a senior aide to Senator Robert Dole and was a fellow at the Center for Strategic & International Studies; and, in a pinstriped suit, Jennifer Millerwise Dyck, a former spokeswoman for the CIA (where, I later read in her biography I received that day, she "initiated the agency's first coordinated corporate branding and advertising strategy") and for Vice President Dick Cheney.



Jennifer Millerwise Dyck

The conference room, located just past the reception desk, was bland and sparsely decorated. A coffeepot and a black plastic tray of cookies lay on a countertop just across from where I sat. After offering us refreshments, Schumacher commenced with a PowerPoint slide show, which

he projected onto a wall. One of the first slides was called "Soft Soundings," and it ran through what Schumacher described as a "vox populi of policymakers" on the subject of Turkmenistan, gleaned from interviews conducted by him and his colleagues in preparing for the meeting with The Maldon Group. Now is "Turkmenistan's most important moment since independence," read one quote, attributed to an unnamed foundation fellow. "No one is looking for perfection on democracy and human rights reforms," read a second sounding, this one from an administration official. I wagged my head, encouraged by this welcome news. "This really is an opportunity to define the new government of Turkmenistan," Schumacher said, and at this point Jones took over. After speaking with her former colleagues at the State Department, she said, she had concluded that the Bush Administration was hoping to improve relations with the Berdymukhamedov government. Her contacts at State weren't expecting "miracles" in terms of political reform; even a few small steps, like the new Internet cafes, would provide some "good hooks" APCO could use to promote the regime.

"People like Beth can call up these policymakers," Schumacher said with a shake of the head, as if he himself were in awe of Jones's access. "Getting information like that with a couple of phone calls is priceless." Schumacher said he had made calls of his own and had learned from a staff director at "a key committee" that hearings on the topic of energy security were coming up. "Turkmenistan has a role to play here and [that] helps us talk about it in a positive way," he said. "It's another hook."

In addition to the core team around the table, Schumacher stressed, APCO had on hand a number of other heavies who could be called upon to assist the Turkmenistan campaign. These included former Senator Don Riegle, who, Schumacher said, was tight with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid; and former Congressman Don Bonker, who had close ties with Tom Lantos, the new Democratic chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. But what about the Republican side? I asked with concern. Schumacher assured me that the firm had access to people in both parties, "not because we've contributed money" (though APCO employees, I subsequently discovered, had contributed more than \$100,000 during the last three election cycles) but because of the high esteem in which the firm's stable of former officials was generally held. And, he added with a grin, Dyck had such strong ties to the G.O.P. that she alone was "worth six" of APCO's Democratic lobbyists.

"What can I say?" Dyck crowed, throwing her arms out.

Turning to media strategy, Schumacher presented APCO's broad review of the coverage. The bad news: almost all mentions of Turkmenistan were negative. On the upside, there wasn't very much coverage to speak of. Now was the time to strike. Wasn't he worried, I asked, that the Turkmen regime would be held to impossibly high human-rights standards? Schumacher sought to put my mind at ease. With any P.R. campaign there were bound to be "isolated incidents that look bad, and it's up to the communications company to figure out a way to be honest about them, to react and to put them in proper perspective, to make sure they don't derail the campaign." On the other hand, he allowed that something "really terrible" - the words dangled in the air - would be hard to overcome.

There was also the nagging question of public disclosure. Yes, Schumacher said, APCO would have to register and The Maldon Group would need to provide some additional information at that time, but there was no need to lose sleep about that. "We live up to the spirit and letter of the law, but we would provide minimal information," he said. "[We'd] say we're working for The Maldon Group on behalf of the government and would file semiannual reports. And that's it."

But what if we get calls from journalists? I asked.

"If they call you," Jones said with a big smile, "refer them to us."

Later in the presentation, a slide revealed the proposed budget for APCO's Turkmenistan operation: \$40,000 per month, plus expenses (estimated at about 10 percent of fees), and more for any travel outside of Washington.

Paid advertising and special events would cost extra, and Schumacher proposed that we set up a new website for the Turkmen Embassy in Washington, which would cost The Maldon Group another \$35,000.[4] In total, getting out our message about a new and improved Turkmenistan would require about \$600,000 over the first year.

What would we get for our money? APCO's strategy was laid out on a slide entitled "Elements of a Communications Program," of which there were four. The first was "policy maker outreach," and thanks to its political contacts, APCO would have no problem here. "Anyone who tells you they can get a congressman to do what you want ought not to be believed, but we can get in the door and make the case," Schumacher said.

APCO would easily be able to arrange meetings between Turkmen officials and key members of Congress, and might be able to organize a fact-finding trip to the country as well. Given the recent scandal surrounding the lobbyist Jack Abramoff, it would be difficult and even unwise for The Maldon Group to sponsor a congressional trip directly, Schumacher said, but there would surely be official delegations traveling to the region, and "we have the contacts to urge them to stop there."

Downen stepped in here, suggesting it was premature to rule out the possibility of organizing a private junket to Turkmenistan for a crew from Congress. True, The Maldon Group shouldn't organize it directly, but he'd had personal experience with academic groups sponsoring trips. "Maybe Turkmenistan has a think tank or university," he offered. "Under the old rules, any bona fide academic institution could sponsor [travel]. Under the new rules I'm not sure, but I can check." [5]

The second element of the strategy was a "media campaign." In a slide entitled "Core Media Relations Activities," APCO promised to "create news items and news outflow," organize media events, and identify and work with "key reporters." As this was her field of expertise, Dyck presented this slide. The media would be receptive to stories about Turkmenistan with the change of government, she said, plus "energy security is an additional hook. We can also bring things like Internet cafes to their attention."

In addition to influencing news reports, Downen added, the firm could drum up positive op-eds in newspapers. "We can utilize some of the think-tank experts who would say, 'On the one hand this and the other hand that,' and we place it as a guest editorial." Indeed, Schumacher said, APCO had someone on staff who "does nothing but that" and had succeeded in placing thousands of opinion pieces.

Discussion about the strategy's third item - building "coalition support," which meant developing seemingly independent and therefore more credible allies to offer favorable views about Turkmenistan - was brief. As a slide on the topic put it, we would need to start small, given that the "closed nature of country has inhibited investment and exchanges." For now, the best coalition partners would be current and potential corporate investors in Turkmenistan, as well as "think tank experts and academics."

How could we use think tanks and academics? I wondered. "I'm glad you asked," Schumacher said with a chuckle. He flipped to the next slide, which discussed the fourth element of the campaign: "events." One possibility, Downen said, would be to hold a forum on U.S.-Turkmen relations, preferably built around a visit to the United States by a Turkmen official. Possible hosts would include The Heritage Foundation, the

Center for Strategic & International Studies, and the Council on Foreign Relations. "Last week I contacted a number of colleagues at think tanks," Downen went on. "Some real experts could easily be engaged to sponsor or host a public forum or panel that would bring in congressional staff and journalists." The only cost would be refreshments and room rental - Schumacher joked that APCO would bake the cookies to save The Maldon Group a little money - and could yield a tremendous payoff. "If we can get a paper published or a speech at a conference, we can get a friendly member of Congress to insert that in the Congressional Record and get that printed and send it out," Schumacher said. "So you take one event and get it multiplied."

Another option, he explained, would be to pay Roll Call and The Economist to host a Turkmenistan event. It would be costlier than the think-tank route, perhaps around \$25,000, but in compensation we would have tighter control over the proceedings, plus gain "the imprimatur of a respected third party." In order that the event not seem like paid advertising, the title for the event should be "bigger than your theme," Schumacher explained, even as it would be put together in a way "that you get your message across." So we wouldn't call it "Turkmenistan Day"? I asked. No, Schumacher replied. "Energy Security" would be a better theme. "Or 'Caspian Basin Pipelines,'" Jones added.

"That's how you do it," Schumacher said. The Maldon Group wouldn't have its own speaker on the dais, but APCO would line up a few people - possibilities included an administration official or an executive from an American firm involved in Turkmenistan - to speak for us. While promising reform was important, we would probably want to focus on matters like energy and regional security. "In a world where the administration wants some realism, there may be ways to get positive messages out," Schumacher said. A concluding slide laid out the broad benefits that The Maldon Group could expect to see for our \$600,000. These included raising Turkmenistan's profile "as a nation important to the United States," building a "broader base of support" for the country, and improving media coverage. After a series of firm handshakes, I promised I would be back in touch as soon as I had consulted with my superiors in London.

The following morning, Ricardo and I headed to the offices of [Cassidy & Associates](#), perhaps the most prominent of all the Washington lobby shops.[6] It was founded thirty-two years ago by Gerald Cassidy, a former staffer for George McGovern, and for much of its existence was known as a strongly Democratic firm. Cassidy pioneered the practice of lobbying for earmarks - the polite term for pork - but also represents Fortune 500 corporations as well as foreign countries and businesses. Its current clients include Teodoro Obiang, who has ruled the small African nation of Equatorial Guinea since 1979, when he executed his uncle. Between 1998 and 2006, Cassidy was paid more than \$235 million in lobbying fees, more than any other firm in Washington.

Cassidy's headquarters are just a block away from APCO's but are far more elegant. The firm occupies the entire fourth floor of its building, so that one enters the offices upon exiting the elevator. A receptionist walked Ricardo and me into a large conference room with a beautiful wood table polished to a bright sheen. There were about twenty seats around the table, and eight settings had been laid out with a glass, each set atop a paper coaster embossed with the firm's name. The table held an assortment of canned soft drinks, a pitcher of ice water with lemon slices, a cup of sharpened pencils, and a pile of yellow legal pads.

A phalanx of six Cassidy officials soon entered the conference room, all dressed in elegant business attire of varying shades of black, gray, and navy blue. There was Chuck Dolan, a former senior P.R. consultant for the Kerry-Edwards campaign; Gordon Speed, the firm's pudgy, baby-faced director of business development; tall, thin Gerald Warburg, a former Hill staffer and company vice president; Christy Moran, who during the meeting told me she had previously worked for Saudi Arabia and helped boost its image with an "allies program" that sent visitors to the country; and David Bartlett, another P.R. specialist whose firm biography said he had helped corporate CEOs "face the nation's toughest journalists."

The sixth member of the Cassidy team, and its clear leader, was firm vice chairman Gregg Hartley, who with his crew cut and serious manner initially reminded me of a drill sergeant; but soon he loosened up and proved to possess a certain folksy appeal. Until 2003 he had been a top aide to then House Majority Whip Roy Blunt, and he maintains close ties to top Republicans in Congress. When Hartley quit his Hill job and decided to become a lobbyist, a "bidding war for his services ensued," the Washington Post later reported. "Cassidy ... won it with an offer of just under \$1 million a year," plus a "substantial percentage" of the lobbying fees Hartley generated. Hartley's hiring marked a key moment in Cassidy & Associates' transformation during the past decade into a lobbying enterprise that is increasingly identified with the Republican Party.



Gregg Hartley

As was the case with APCO, Cassidy had immediately offered to meet with me. In an initial phone conversation with Speed, Hartley, and Dolan, the three had asked only a few softball questions about The Maldon Group (and, like APCO, offered to sign a confidentiality agreement) before they began their sales pitch. Hartley pointed out that Cassidy's work for Equatorial Guinea was "a very similar sort of representation to what you're talking about" with Turkmenistan. The Obiang regime had received a bit of bad publicity - he mentioned here a banking scandal involving the government - and Cassidy's first job had been "to identify inaccurate or biased stories and try to correct them." [7] Hartley also boasted about Cassidy's political contacts, saying, "We strongly believe in a bipartisan [approach] and mirroring the power structure.... You have to find champions on both sides."

Hartley returned to that theme during the meeting at Cassidy's office. His firm, he said after passing Ricardo and me copies of a corporate brochure, [8] had "strong personal relationships" with policymakers, and not just to a committee chairman here and there, as was the case with some of its competitors. Cassidy had ties across the board - at the staff level, the committee level, the Republican and Democratic leadership, and the administration.

"We know you're talking to other firms," Hartley said pointedly. "You're going to have a hard time matching ... [the] types of successes" his firm had racked up. For example, thanks to Cassidy's aggressive media strategy and trips it had organized to Equatorial Guinea for congressional staffers, things were now looking up for the government there. The proof: three years ago, Hartley said, Parade Magazine had ranked Obiang as "the world's sixth worst dictator," grimacing as he stated that last word. "He's still not a great guy," he went on, "but he's not in the top ten anymore, and we can take some credit for helping them figure out how to work down that list. Is he going to win the U.N. humanitarian award next year? No, he's not, but we're making progress."^[9]

Now Warburg took over the meeting. He talked with some passion about two "remarkable lobbying campaigns" that the firm had been involved with, both of which had succeeded in getting the U.S. government to move "against its express will." The first was eliminating a longtime trade embargo against Vietnam, which the firm had achieved over the opposition of the families of POWs and MIAs. The key to success was assembling an outside pressure group called the Multinational Business Development Coalition, which was made up of major American corporations seeking business in Vietnam. "The U.S. had no relations," Warburg said. "We changed that policy, ended the embargo, and opened Vietnam up to U.S. economic exchange."

The second campaign, Warburg said, involved winning permission in 1995 for President Lee Teng-hui of Taiwan to make a private visit to the United States "over the express opposition of the executive branch." At the time, Taiwan's embassy wasn't even allowed to lobby in Washington without permission from the State Department. Evading that obstacle was simple: since the government couldn't retain Cassidy, a Taiwanese think tank fronting for it did. President Bill Clinton had said he wouldn't allow Lee to come to the United States, so Cassidy, Warburg recounted, began a campaign to lobby Congress. After both chambers passed resolutions in support of a visit by Lee, the White House caved. "The president of the United States reversed policy," said Warburg. The campaign had been so brilliant, in fact, that graduate students had written theses on it.

Warburg also mentioned his past work for Merhav, an Israeli firm with major interests in Turkmenistan, for which Cassidy had obtained Export-Import Bank financing for a trans-Caspian pipeline. Unlike the case with other lobbying firms The Maldon Group might hire, "We really know Turkmenistan. It wouldn't be on-the-job training for us."

When Warburg had represented Merhav, he met a number of Turkmen officials. "Unfortunately, the previous government had a history of shuffling ministers," he said. "I won't pursue the metaphor." To which Hartley added, "We won't ask where all of them were shuffled!" There was general merriment, which seemed inappropriate, given that sixteen ministers were jailed or sent into internal exile last year, one of whom is believed to have died in prison.

Hartley announced that he and his colleagues had a few questions about The Maldon Group. I would be as helpful as I could, I replied, but discretion was our firm's lifeblood; while it pained me "to look like I'm being evasive," there wasn't much I could say.

"We're going to ask questions, and you may have to throw the wall up," Hartley said. "Don't mention names if you can't mention names."

The questions were quite easy to handle: I did little more than toss out the same scraps of information I had given them before. We were a small group of British, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European investors; we had a close relationship to the government, but there were no Turkmen officials involved in The Maldon Group. I reiterated my concerns about public-disclosure requirements, and Hartley assured me I could rest easy. "We have to disclose who we represent, but there doesn't have to be great detail," he said. "The way we would handle this, there'd be very little about you and virtually none about your investors."

When it was time for the hard sell, Warburg began by giving me a piece of intelligence he had picked up - something, he said, for me to share "with your friends and investors back in England." The previous week, he claimed, there had been a meeting on Turkmenistan at the highest level of the U.S. government. "We'd like to make sure you're on the agenda for the next such meeting," he said pointedly. "We'd like to be involved in prepping the individuals before such a meeting, and we'd like to be involved in interpreting the outcome to your investors, and through you to the government in a way that really empowers you in that market." Hartley, too, sought to emphasize how interested Cassidy was in winning the contract. "This is the sort of thing we do extremely well," he said at one point.

"It's the kind of stuff that gets our juices flowing."

Of course, there was the question of money, specifically how much of it The Maldon Group would need to hire Cassidy. For Turkmenistan, Hartley said, there could be no quick, easy solutions; hence, he proposed a three-year effort at from \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million annually - and that could run higher, he warned, if a do-gooder organization like a human-rights group targeted the regime, necessitating intensified spin control by the firm's lobbyists. "You've looked at our bios," he said. "Look at our track record and what we've charged for other representations ... and you'll see you're not being gouged."

While insisting that I didn't write the checks, I said the figure seemed reasonable to me. "Others will do it for less, but you won't get people with our experience, our knowledge of Turkmenistan, our ties to [the] State [Department], National Security Council, and some parts of the intelligence community," Warburg said.

Cassidy saw its strategy as having two central prongs, one targeting policymakers and the other targeting the media. Among the questions I'd asked had been whether it was advisable to arrange a trip to Turkmenistan for members of Congress. Hartley said that it was, but it would be critical to pick "the right members of Congress," which he defined as those with "a leaning that will be instrumental in us making progress on our representation." As at APCO, the Cassidy team said that the post-Abramoff climate would make it harder to arrange a private trip for members of Congress - "but not impossible," in Hartley's words. In the meantime, a less visible trip for Hill staffers could be more easily accomplished.

Bringing Turkmen officials to Washington was also a must, though we needed to be realistic. If The Maldon Group said it wanted Berdymukhamedov to address a joint session of Congress, Cassidy would tell you that's not possible, Warburg said. On the other hand, might Cassidy be able to arrange "a coffee in the Senate Foreign Relations hearing room of the U.S. Capitol where the foreign minister is warmly received?" Yes, it very well might.

Also, The Maldon Group should not underestimate the value of arranging a trip to Turkmenistan for journalists and think-tank analysts, which was something Dolan said he had done for the Valdai International Discussion Club, a group funded by Russian interests that offers all-expenses-paid trips to Russia. Amid the general pampering, the Western academics and reporters who attend are granted audiences with senior Russian political figures. During the meeting, Dolan simply described it as a way to give people "firsthand information" and mentioned that past attendees had included Ariel Cohen of The Heritage Foundation, Marshall Goldman of Harvard, and Jim Hoagland of the Washington Post. A similar program might work for Turkmenistan, he suggested.

Two weeks after the meeting, Cassidy laid out more of its strategic thinking in a twelve-page proposal that it sent to me by email. The firm's lobbyists would educate senior government officials and opinion makers "on positive developments taking place in Turkmenistan," and would sell the country on the basis of its "strategic importance in Central Asia" and the "critical role" it could play in American energy security. Cassidy's preliminary research already had determined that there was "accelerated interest" in Turkmenistan "at the highest levels of the U.S. government." This was a great opportunity, since it would make it easier to reach out to government officials as well as the media, but it also presented a challenge, as "greater attention can bring greater scrutiny."

Of course, "attention" and "scrutiny" are essentially synonymous; the only reason that more of it posed a challenge to Cassidy's proposed lobbying campaign was that in the case of Turkmenistan, the truth was almost never good. Cassidy had, in fact, already uncovered troubling news: "We have become aware," the proposal said ominously, "of U.S. determination to aggressively push an agenda of human rights and democratic reforms in exchange for greater engagement with Ashgabat." (This supposed discovery was surely a scare tactic. The Bush Administration has openly prioritized trade and business promotion, not human rights, with other major Caspian energy producers. According to a well-placed source, State Department officials have made it very clear that the Bush Administration's major policy goal in Turkmenistan is opening the country to investment by U.S. energy firms.) To deal with the threat of scrutiny, Cassidy would seek to drive "the story being told about Turkmenistan by the media, rather than merely reacting to it. By engaging with correspondents, we will coordinate a global message about political, social and economic progress."

As part of this initiative, the firm would plant pro-Turkmenistan op-eds from friendly authors it recruited. Cassidy would also put together "a list of potential vulnerabilities, such as humanitarian issues, social conditions and otherwise.... With these issues in mind, we will conduct 'worst-case' scenario planning and response development by anticipating crises, preparing spokespeople, [and] drafting statements." In other words, Cassidy would have an emergency-response network in place should, for example, opposition members happen to be mowed down by government guns. "We will be your eyes and ears in Washington, D.C.," the proposal said.

In the weeks after my meetings, both APCO and Cassidy contacted me, eager to carry out the Turkmen campaign. I replied with notes of regret, explaining that The Maldon Group was unsure about how to proceed but that for the time being, at least, their services would not be required. Still, it was hard not to daydream about what might have been accomplished for the "newly elected government of Turkmenistan" if I'd actually had the few million dollars to spare. In May, I attended "Angola Day," an all-day conference that had been organized on behalf of the regime of President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, which, while not equaling the Turkmen rulers in flair, is nevertheless one of the most crooked and predatory in the world. Angola Day's sponsors included the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, which hosted the event at its downtown headquarters, the Angolan government, and the U.S.-Angola Chamber of Commerce, which receives financial support from American oil companies.

It was impossible to say whether a lobbying firm was directly involved in orchestrating the event. But other than its unfortunate title - had APCO been running the show, it would have been something like "Africa and American Energy Security: Partners in Prosperity" - Angola Day was straight out of the playbooks laid out for Turkmenistan: it had the imprimatur of a respected third party (the Wilson Center), a coalition of corporate allies, and a smattering of pliant academics and officials who seemed more than willing to pen a friendly op-ed if need be. The keynote speaker was Joaquim David, Angola's elegantly tailored industry minister, and as I watched him deliver his address, it was hard not to think of a Turkmen official on that same dais, giving voice to the same empty slogans and catchwords, speaking (as David did) of his government's commitment to sustainable development, environmental protection, and social justice - despite the fact that Dos Santos has done absolutely nothing to demonstrate these commitments. I was especially wistful during the coffee break, when I could see the real business of the conference being conducted. Here was Witney Schneidman, a former State Department official and member of the U.S.-Angola Chamber, approaching every Angolan official he saw with an unctuous ear-to-ear grin on his face; Hank Cohen, a former assistant secretary of state and former lobbyist for Angola, chatting up the diamond magnate Maurice Tempelman; a Chevron executive and an official from the U.S. Agency for International Development, greeting each other like long-lost friends.

It was a vision of just how regimes like Angola and Azerbaijan, Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, the serial abrogators of "human dignity," can make and keep their wealthy American friends. Someday soon, perhaps, the same will happen for Turkmenistan - God and lobbyists willing.

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Ken Silverstein's ["Washington Babylon" weblog](#), focused on political corruption in Washington, D.C has been appearing at Harper's since April 2006.