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Lobbyist maintains Bush knew him well

By Andy Sullivan

REUTERS

WASHINGTON — Jack Abramoff said in correspondence made public Thursday that President Bush met him "almost a dozen" times, disputing White House claims that Bush did not know the former lobbyist at the center of a corruption scandal.

"The guy saw me in almost a dozen settings, and joked with me about a bunch of things, including details of my kids. Perhaps he has forgotten everything, who knows," Abramoff wrote in an e-mail to Kim Eisler, national editor for the Washingtonian magazine.

Abramoff added that Bush once invited him to his Texas ranch.

The messages were made public by the American Progress Action Fund, a liberal activist group. Eisler confirmed their accuracy to Reuters but said he did not intend for them to become public.

"They reflect the feeling of frustration he has not just with Bush but with all these guys claiming they didn't know him," said Eisler, who knew Abramoff through a book he wrote about the Pequot Indian Tribe.

Abramoff pleaded guilty to fraud charges in early January and is cooperating with prosecutors in a corruption probe that could implicate officials across Washington.

Bush has said he never had a discussion with Abramoff and does not remember having his picture taken with him.

The White House has said Abramoff attended three Hanukkah receptions there.

Eisler said he had seen five photos of Abramoff with Bush, none from Hanukkah parties.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Thursday that the revelations did not prove Bush knew him well.

"I think as the president also indicated, he's taken at least five photos with many people in this room at the annual holiday reception. And so I think you need to put this in context," McClellan said.

Abramoff spokesman Andrew Blum declined to comment.

Abramoff raised more than \$100,000 for Bush's 2004 re-election campaign, a feat that won him an invitation to Bush's ranch in August 2003, the National Journal reported at the time.

Abramoff said he did not make the trip because as an Orthodox Jew he cannot travel on Saturdays.

In the wake of Abramoff's indictment, the Bush-Cheney campaign said it would donate to charity \$6,000 in contributions made by Abramoff or his clients, but not the money he helped raise.

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