

John Murtha's Troubles
By: Christopher Malo

John Murtha's 3 1/2 decades of service as a Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives have not come without controversy. His 35 years of service to the people of the 12th district of southeastern Pennsylvania in the House has earned Murtha various distinguished positions and distinctions.

As the first Vietnam combat veteran elected to the House, he currently serves on the Appropriations Committee and chairs its Subcommittee on Defense. But a mere six years into his tenure Murtha became embroiled in the first of several controversies that would cause some to wonder where this public servant's allegiance lies.

The FBI's Abscam sting operation of the late 1970s and early 1980s started as an investigation into stolen property, but turned into a public corruption scandal with federal agents posing as sheiks attempting to bribe their way past the immigration process.

The investigation eventually led to the arrest and removal from office of several government officials. Murtha was videotaped in meetings with the sheiks, but because of the ambiguous nature of his taped conversations, was never prosecuted.

More recently, Murtha's name has surfaced again surrounding controversy over campaign contributions and earmarks, due to his relationship with two lobbying firms: KSA Consulting and the PMA Group. As a part of one of the most powerful committees, specifically as chairman of the defense subcommittee, Murtha is in a position to affect the spending bills of the committee.

When asked about the questionable donations, Murtha's Director of Communications Matthew Mazonkey stated, "Congressman Murtha has said that if any donations were found to be illegal then he would obviously give those donations to charity. PMA contributed to hundreds of Democrats and Republicans. There were some individual donors who have been questioned by the media, and some members of Congress returned those donations. Congressman Murtha did not receive donations from those individuals in question."

This has caused concern and interest in understanding the nature of the relationships between Murtha and these two particular lobbying groups, and the clients they represent. Relationships that could be considered personal to some.

A 2005 report in the Los Angeles Times notes that John Murtha's brother Robert "Kit" Murtha, was a senior partner at KSA Consulting, a lobbyist group that represented many defense contractors who received government contracts from the subcommittee his brother John chaired. A former aide of Murtha who worked for him for 27 years, was also a senior official at KSA. The same report also points out another recipient of government funds has been clients of the PMA Group, a lobbyist firm started by a former staffer on the same subcommittee Murtha currently chairs.

According to the Federal Election Commission's website, between January 1, 2007 and December 31, 2008, Murtha received nearly \$3.5 million in contributions, roughly \$2.1 million coming from individuals and \$1.25 million coming from other various committee contributions.

One of the businesses that has employed the PMA Group is Advanced Acoustic Concepts, who paid \$120,000 to PMA during 2008 according to the Center for Responsive Politics' website. According to records from the FEC's website, during the same election cycle seven employees of the company made several campaign contributions to Murtha totaling \$27,100. In addition, Advanced Acoustic Concepts also made three donations as a business for \$10,000 in total, for a sum of \$37,100.

Argon ST is another company that hired the PMA Group. Not only did Argon pay PMA \$190,000 in 2008, employees also gave \$30,200 to Murtha's campaign. In addition, FEC records show multiple donations from the employees of Argon. It was not only executives that donated to Murtha's campaign, but the list also includes engineers and two contributions from Gabrielle Carruth, Vice President of Government Relations at Argon ST.

Both Advanced Acoustic Concepts and Argon ST are defense contractors. Contractors with a vested interest in the same committee Representative Murtha chairs. A look at Murtha's voting record shows he supports the defense industry, but at the same time has voted to take measures to end the war in Iraq. His voting record also indicates not being entirely supportive on the way the government

has handled the war in regards to U.S. policies, domestically and internationally.

When surveying the businesses that paid the PMA Group the most amounts of money during 2008, and cross-referencing it with Murtha's campaign contributions, a pattern begins to develop.

The examples listed above account for about 2 percent of the campaign finances raised for Murtha's reelection, but these numbers alone represent only a small percentage of businesses cross referenced between two online sources detailing fund flow, the Lobby Spending Database on the PMA Group and the SEC's Campaign Contribution website. These are a few businesses, but by no means all the businesses, that spent larger amounts with the lobbying firm. These companies that hired the PMA Group are only three of the 131 businesses that employed PMA in 2008.

According to FEC, PMA Group as a business donated \$5,000 to Murtha as well as a \$1,000 donation from Thoms Veltri, who works in the capacity of Government Relations for PMA. Every business that hired PMA Group does not have ties to Murtha, but others apparently do.

When the PMA Group faced close scrutiny at the beginning of 2009 for funneling funds from businesses into Washington DC, most of the partners left, forming Flagship Government Relations. Two of its clients include Advanced Acoustic Concepts and Argon ST.

In 2007, the last year the full fiscal year data is available, Argon ST was awarded over \$84 million in government contracts according to FedSpending.org, a project of OMB Watch. The same website notes over \$15 million in government contracts went to Advanced Acoustic Concepts during the same time period.

Scott Williams, the chief financial officer who handles government relations for Advanced Acoustic Concepts, did not return phone calls.

Emails and calls to the media department at Argon ST were not returned.

Several attempts to contact Daniel Cunningham, the lobbyist now representing both Advanced Acoustic Concepts and Argon ST at Flagship Government Relations, as he did in the same capacity while at the PMA Group, were not successful.

While these companies may employ a group like PMA to affect their desired influence in

Washington, this is only part of the picture. Argon ST is a Virginia based company, and Advanced Acoustic Concepts has offices in Florida and New York. Yet Conemaugh Health System, a health care provider, paid PMA \$240,000 last year. Conemaugh is headquartered in Murtha's hometown, Johnstown, Pa.

Individuals from Conemaugh donated over \$14,000 to the Murtha campaign. In an interview with Pittsburgh's Post-Gazette newspaper in March, when Murtha was asked about the money and business he has funneled into his Congressional district, Murtha replied, "If I'm corrupt, it's because I take care of my district."

And take care of it he does. A frequent claim is that not only does Murtha acquire campaign contributions via questionable relationships, but also aggressively pursues earmark additions to bills to benefit the businesses in the district he represents.

While this may not appear to suggest impropriety, a recent report that aired on ABC News points out in addition to about forty seven million in government funds that has gone to the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport, recent economic stimulus money has been diverted here, to repave a secondary runway for an airport that averages 20 passengers a day for its three daily flights out.

Perhaps it is his allegiance to the people of his district that causes his constituents to not question his relationships with PACs or the whispers in Washington. As a member since 1974, Murtha finds himself as the eighth most senior member of the House. Since 1789, over 10,000 men and women have served in the House, yet only 80 have been in service longer than Murtha. He won the election in 2008 over Republican candidate Bill Russell by a 16 percent margin.