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## Abscam

On February 3, 1980, the Philadelphia Inquirer and other newspapers revealed details about a secret two-year FBI sting operation code-named "Abscam." By 1984, four members of the U.S. House of Representatives and one U.S. Senator had been convicted of bribery and conspiracy charges. It was the biggest scandal to hit Washington since Watergate though it is largely forgotten today. Why is that? Because neither party has an incentive to bring it up.

### What was Abscam?

The name "Abscam" is derived from the fictitious company the FBI set up - Abdul Enterprises - to lure various public officials into accepting bribes.

On September 19, 1978, the FBI - via another fictitious company named "Olympic Construction Corp." - rented a house in Washington D.C. from, ironically enough, a Washington Post reporter named Lee Lescaze. According to an article Lescaze wrote in 1997 for the Post, "the FBI knew that I was a newspaper reporter and apparently didn't care." He also said that "The FBI is a good tenant. It pays the rent on time."

The house - along with a yacht in Florida and hotel rooms in Pennsylvania and New Jersey - was used to set up meetings between various public officials and a mysterious Arab sheik named Abdul who wanted:

- To purchase asylum in the U.S.
- To involve them in an investment scheme
- To get help in getting his money out of his country

FBI agents posing as associates of Abdul approached various public officials with Abdul's goals and how they could help to achieve them. The FBI secretly videotaped each meeting and had no trouble finding politicians willing to abuse their office in exchange for bribes. Despite the convictions, the FBI itself became a target as politicians who were not caught soon realized how easily they could have been.

Rep. Richard Kelly of Florida is notorious for a January 8, 1980 videotape showing

### Facts and Figures

#### The Abscam Sting



▶ Though the the name "Abscam," short for "Abdul scam," was seen as offensive by some Arab-Americans, the name stuck. The FBI handed out cloth patches (see above) for the sting operation to team members. The patch showed a bee with a turban on.

Image from the collection of Bidguy59

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About this capture

Angelo Errichetti was not as lucky. In 1981, New Jersey State Senator Errichetti was sentenced to six years in prison and fined \$40,000 for his involvement in Abscam.

Representative Frank Thompson (D-N.J.), used \$24,000 of campaign funds for his legal fees related to his Abscam trial. This was actually legal at the time but showed in the minds of many just how unethical some of these "entrapped" defendants were.

On May 1, 1981, Senator Williams was convicted and on March 11, 1982, [Senator Williams of New Jersey resigned](#) rather than have his colleagues vote him out.

One of the Abscam figures was quoted on one of the videotapes as claiming that then Hempstead Town Supervisor Al D'Amato was "definitely taking contributions -- he's on the take." D'Amato - who would be no stranger to scandal over the coming decades - later became a three-term Senator for the state of New York. Ironically, he held investigations into the Whitewater affair in the mid-90s.

### Abscam Aftermath

Although a repeat of Abscam would doubtless net dozens if not hundreds of convictions today, don't expect the Justice Department or the FBI to conduct such a sting operation ever again. The political appointees to Justice are well aware their party faithful were not amused by Abscam. For a brief moment in our nations history starting with Watergate and ending with Abscam, the American people learned what scoundrels their elected officials were. One can only hope that future generations will recognize this.

### Share Your Memories!

Do you have any thoughts on the FBI's Abscam investigation? [Let us know!](#) (We may print your comments here.)

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