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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

A Small-Time Crime With Hints of Big-Time Connections Lights Up the Net

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The Internet is a great breeding ground for political conspiracies, and there is a new one lighting up computer monitors across the country. Bloggers are fascinated by what they see as eerie parallels between Watergate and a phone-jamming scandal in New Hampshire. It has low-level Republican operatives involved in dirty campaign tricks. It has checks from donors with murky backgrounds. It has telephone calls to the White House. What is unclear is whether it is the work of a few rogue actors, or something larger.

In 2002, there was a hard-fought Senate race between Gov. Jeanne Shaheen, the Democrat, and John Sununu, the Republican. On Election Day, Democratic workers arrived at five get-out-the-vote offices to find their phone lines jammed. It turned out that the jamming was being done by an Idaho telemarketing firm that was being paid by a Virginia consulting group. The fee for the jamming, reportedly \$15,600, was paid by New Hampshire Republicans.

The executive director of the New Hampshire Republican Party and the president of the Virginia consulting group pleaded guilty for their part in the scheme. James Tobin, who was the New England political director for the Republican National Committee, went to trial and was convicted of telephone harassment last December.

Now, Jack Abramoff and his Indian tribe clients have joined the cast of characters, and some records of phone calls to the White House have turned up, though the significance of both of these revelations is hotly disputed. The evidence that the phone-jamming scandal goes higher than Mr. Tobin remains scant. But the watchdogs are right about this: the news media, prosecutors and the general public should demand more information about what happened.

The parallels drawn with Watergate are a good place to start:

1. The return of the "second-rate burglary." The New Hampshire phone-jamming scandal is being dismissed as small-time, state-level misconduct, but it occurred at a critical moment in a tough election.

In November 2002, Republicans were intent on winning a Senate majority so they would control the White House and both houses of Congress. They saw the Sununu-Shaheen race as pivotal. On Election Day morning, the phone lines were jammed at the Democratic offices and at a get-out-the-vote operation run by a firefighters' union. The police were called, and the lines were eventually freed up. The election wasn't as close as expected. Mr. Sununu

won, and Republicans retook the Senate.

2. The return of the high-priced lawyer. Aficionados of the Watergate connection like to point out that one of the first clues that the Watergate burglars were not ordinary small-time crooks was the presence of a slick lawyer in an expensive suit at their first court appearance. In the New Hampshire case, Mr. Tobin was represented by Williams & Connolly, a pre-eminent white-collar criminal law firm. The legal bills, which published estimates have put at more than \$2.5 million, were paid by the Republican National Committee. Democrats are asking why the committee footed the bill, if Mr. Tobin was a rogue actor who implicated the national party in a loathsome and embarrassing crime.

3. The return of "follow the money." (As if it ever left.) New Hampshire Democrats pored over the filings of the New Hampshire Republican Party and found three contributions for \$5,000 each, all shortly before the election. One was from Americans for a Republican Majority, Tom DeLay's political action committee. The other two were from the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, tribes that were clients of Jack Abramoff. Those checks add up almost exactly to the cost of the phone jamming.

Republicans say that a lot of money flows into a campaign and that there is nothing to tie these checks to the phone jamming. But New Hampshire Democrats argue that it is highly unusual for Indian tribes to contribute to a state party in a state that does not have federally recognized Indian tribes or Indian gambling.

4. Does anybody get to ask: "What did they know, and when did they know it?" Democrats would, of course, like to connect the jamming to the White House, and this month they found a possible link. The Senate Majority Project, a pro-Democratic campaign group, examined the phone records that came out in Mr. Tobin's case and found that he made dozens of calls to the White House's office of political affairs right when he was executing the phone-jamming scheme. Ken Mehlman, the Republican National Committee chairman who was the White House political director at the time, insists that close contact of this kind between political operatives is the norm on Election Day, and that none of the calls mentioned the jamming.

New Hampshire Democrats have filed a civil lawsuit seeking to learn more about what occurred. They want the judge to give them access to e-mail messages that could shed light on the phone calls to the White House, and to let them question officials of the Republican National Committee and the White House. In March, a federal grand jury indicted a fourth person in the jamming scheme, the former co-owner of the Idaho telemarketing firm. The Senate Majority Project has been putting key documents on its Web site (www.senatemajority.com) and is continuing to investigate.

The phone jamming could turn out to be the work of a few bad actors. It could, on the other hand, take the Abramoff scandals to a new level of skullduggery. At least, 34 years after Watergate, we know the right questions to ask.

