

In the years just after the American Civil War, were bribes paid to win congressional approval for the purchase of Alaska? And did the American politician credited by history with making the deal know about the payments?

The answer to both questions is almost certainly yes, according to a major new biography of William H. **Seward**.

The first juicy political corruption scandal in Alaska's history has been disinterred by biographer Walter Stahr. The author bases his claim on two pieces of strong evidence -- private jottings by two political associates of **Seward**, each saying he'd been told about the bribes by the Secretary of State himself.

The \$7.2 million purchase price for Russian America, so familiar to Alaska school kids, apparently included \$7 million for the czar and \$200,000 for the Russian ambassador to cover miscellaneous "expenses" associated with the sale.

The man behind the deal was one of the leading American politicians of his era. Through the war years, **Seward** was Abraham Lincoln's closest cabinet adviser. His memory has been enshrined here in the name of a town, a major highway, and a day off for state workers.

Lately, **Seward** has also returned to national attention, thanks to the Civil War's sesquicentennial and a bestselling book by Doris Kearns Goodwin about Lincoln's management style, "Team of Rivals." In the new Steven Spielberg movie, "Lincoln," **Seward** is one of the principal characters, played by the actor David Strathairn.

But lurking in the shadows of **Seward's** reputation has long been the question of whether the signature accomplishment of his career, the Alaska purchase, was achieved through less-than-noble means.

Questions about the money were raised even at the time of the territorial deal. A congressional investigation concluded in 1869 that money had passed secretly from Russian ambassador Edouard de Stoeckl -- known around Washington as "the Baron," though he held no such formal title -- to a trio of powerful lobbyists. The lobbyists paid off journalists for favorable coverage, the investigating committee was told.

Did they pay off members of Congress as well? Allegations to that effect were rampant, but the investigating committee sidestepped these claims as "nebulous gossip."

It turned out, however, that **Seward** spoke openly of such payments at least twice, telling his boss, President Andrew **Johnson**, that the bribes had been as high as \$10,000. That was a lot of money back then, especially measured against the change pocketed by Alaska legislators in the recent Veco political scandal.

Seward's private comments were never reported to investigators. Later, historians did uncover the private journals, but for whatever reason did not give them much credit. In time, questions about Alaska's corrupt legacy were laid quietly to rest.

Until now.

Stahr's genteel and readable 547-page biography, "**Seward**: Lincoln's Indispensable Man," is a generally admiring portrait, which perhaps adds credibility to his head-shaking conclusion that **Seward** perjured himself before Congress when he testified he knew nothing about Alaska payoffs.

"**Seward** knew that . . . his opponents would use every weapon available in order to defeat **Johnson** and the Alaska purchase," Stahr writes. "In short, **Seward** was not a saint, he was a practical politician, and he was prepared if necessary to use dubious means to achieve great goals."

CHANGE OF HEART BY TWO KEY CHAIRMEN

The son of a small-town northern slave-holding family, a U.S. senator and former progressive governor of New York, **Seward** became a leading anti-slavery Republican in the years before the war. He was the favorite to win the party's presidential nomination in 1860, only to be upset at the convention by a small-town lawyer from Illinois. **Seward** joined his rival's cabinet and to some observers became, as Stahr puts it, "the real power in the administration" -- if not its moral force, then its cagey political veteran. He was particularly credited with the tricky maneuvering necessary to keep England and France from entering the war on the side of the Confederacy.

Lincoln and **Seward** became close confidantes and friends. On the night Lincoln was assassinated, **Seward** was wounded by a knife-wielding conspirator. **Seward** recovered, and stayed on with Vice President **Johnson** as a steadying influence through the volatile period of Reconstruction politics and impeachment that followed.

Seward negotiated the treaty for Russia's colony in 1867. It was part of the secretary's expansionist ambition for the United States, according to Stahr, one that also coveted Panama, islands in the Pacific and the Caribbean, and even Greenland and British Columbia. Alaska was seen as important, not only for its resources, but as a forward naval and steamship refueling base on the "great circle" trading route to Asia -- a point expanded on in Stephen Haycox's book "Alaska: An American Colony."

The Alaska purchase idea was popular in its day, historians say, despite being mocked by a few as "**Seward's** Folly." But the atmosphere in Washington at the time was poisonous: President **Johnson** was in the midst of being impeached by the House of Representatives for resisting the so-called Radical Republicans over handling of the post-war South.

The Alaska treaty was signed in secret on March 30, 1867 -- the occasion now celebrated as **Seward's** Day -- but the purchase money could not be wrestled out of Congress until July 1868. The final debate and vote, on a summer day when the temperature in pre-air-conditioned Washington was above 100 degrees, inspired many predictable jokes.

For a year, the main obstacle to the appropriation had not been **Johnson's** impeachment or concern about American imperialism but an objection from a well-connected Massachusetts family named Perkins, who said the Russians owed them money from an arms deal during the Crimean War. They wanted part of the purchase price set aside for their claim.

Stahr's new book points at two key committee chairman, early supporters of the Perkins claim, who reversed themselves to support the Alaska appropriation with no strings attached: Rep. Nathaniel Banks, head of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Rep. Thaddeus Stevens, head of the powerful Ways and Means Committee.

Responding to newspaper reports and rumors at the time, the 1869 congressional inquiry focused its attention on secret payments to lobbyists and journalists. An investigative reporter for the New York Sun named Uriah Painter found the tables turned when one of the exposed lobbyists, a former senator from Mississippi, told Congress that Painter had written his exposes only after asking for a bribe and being turned down. Painter, who may have tried leading on the lobbyists to test his suspicions, denied the charge as a low tactic. The resulting kerfuffle proved highly entertaining to official Washington, while distracting attention from any evidence of wrongdoing by members of Congress themselves.

'TARNISHED LOBBYISTS'

What about that evidence? Stahr quotes from notes kept by President **Johnson** of a Sept. 6, 1868, conversation with **Seward**, in which he was told that the bill succeeded thanks to payments made through Stoeckl, the Russian ambassador. **Seward** told him the money went to lobbyist Robert J. Walker, a friend of **Seward's**, and to the editor of a powerful Washington newspaper, but also to Banks and the "incorruptible Thaddeus Stevens."

Seward revealed something similar to his old friend John Bigelow two weeks later, which Bigelow recorded in his private diary. This time **Seward** also referred to ten unnamed congressmen.

Meanwhile Stoeckl was writing confidentially to Russia, Stahr says, asserting that **Seward** was working with Walker to employ "all sorts of means" to win support, all the while working "with the greatest circumspection."

By the time he gets to his account of Alaska, Stahr has already recounted **Seward's** role in raising funds, dangling patronage jobs and working with "tarnished lobbyists" to secure passage of the 13th Amendment, banning slavery under the Constitution, and to prevent conviction of the president on trumped-up impeachment charges. As in the Alaska case, these forays into the dark political arts were in pursuit of higher political goals, never personal enrichment, according to Stahr.

'NOT GUILTY, OR AT LEAST NOT PROVEN'

Congressional investigators may have never heard what **Seward** admitted privately, but later historians did. Haycox, in his 2002 Alaska history, notes the bribery rumors but concludes **Seward** did nothing more than wine and dine his colleagues. Haycox largely based his conclusion on a short 1983 book by historian Paul S. Holbo that examined the scandal in detail.

In "Tarnished Expansion," Holbo quoted the **Johnson** and Bigelow diaries -- but then dismissed them as unreliable. **Johnson**, known as a tippler, might have been drunk at the time, and the names and dollar figures in the two accounts were inconsistent, Holbo wrote.

The historian cited biographers of Stevens, who doubted the ailing firebrand would have taken a bribe in the last year of his life, despite his need for money. The case against Banks was stronger, Holbo conceded, but also circumstantial. Having found no evidence of money problems or sudden wealth in Banks' letters and family records, Holbo concluded the verdict on Banks should be "not guilty, or at least not proven." He surmised that Stoeckl may have kept the "lion's share" of expense money for himself.

Unfortunately, Stahr doesn't delve into this historical dispute, or take a prosecutorial run at the defense evidence. So the case must remain open. The private records of **Johnson** and Bigelow, consistent in important ways, are treated by Stahr as evidence lying in plain sight. A lawyer himself, he couches his accusation carefully before moving on with his story: "If we believe Bigelow and **Johnson**, **Seward's** testimony was perjury."

The one other person who could have shed light on these matters at the time was the Russian ambassador, Stoeckl. Unfortunately, he was not available to congressional investigators. Two months after the appropriation was approved, the Baron left Washington for Europe on a vacation, and once there announced his retirement -- never to return to the United States.

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