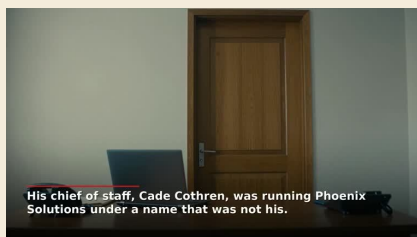


SERIES: CORRUPT AMERICA ♦

The Politician, the Fake Company and the Kickbacks

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

The company was called Phoenix Solutions. It offered political mail services — campaign outreach, constituent flyers, the unglamorous but necessary machinery of running for office. It had a name, a business address, and an owner. The owner did not exist. I'm Marty Shepard, and this is Corrupt America.

CAROL

The owner did not exist. Marty, that sentence just sat there for a moment before I understood it.

MARTY

Glen Casada was, from twenty nineteen to twenty twenty, the Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives. The Speaker controls the floor. The Speaker decides which bills are heard, which committees get funded, and which priorities get air. It is, in a state legislature, about as much power as one person can hold. Beside Casada, managing the mechanics of all that power, was his chief of staff, Cade Cothren.

MARTY

Cothren was effective. He was trusted. He was also, during his time in the Speaker's office, quietly running Phoenix Solutions under a name that was not his own — a fictitious identity, constructed so that payments arriving at Phoenix Solutions would not trace back to anyone sitting in the room where the decisions were made.

CAROL

I keep thinking about the paperwork. Just a vendor registration, a payment authorization, something an office manager approved on a Tuesday afternoon without a second thought. It probably looked completely routine.

MARTY

That ordinariness is the architecture of the scheme. Political campaigns and political committees hire mail vendors all the time. The work is real — flyers do get designed, envelopes do get stuffed, mailers do arrive at people's doors. The

fraud is not in the absence of product. It is in where the money goes after it arrives.

MARTY

Business was steered toward Phoenix Solutions — state-connected funds, political committee money, the kind of contracts a Speaker's circle of influence can direct without it looking unusual. The money arrived at the company. A portion of it then made its way back to Casada as kickbacks. From the outside, it looked like a vendor relationship. From the inside, it was a loop.

CAROL

Can I ask what I think everyone listening is asking right now? A chief of staff running a company under a fake name, funneling money back to his own boss — how does that not set off an alarm somewhere? Surely someone looked at the numbers and felt something was off.

MARTY

Someone eventually did. Federal investigators began examining the political committees, the vendor payments, and the ownership trail of Phoenix Solutions. The fictitious identity Cothren had constructed did not hold up under that kind of scrutiny. A made-up name does not have a tax history. It does not have a bank account that traces to a real person. It does not give a consistent deposition. When investigators pulled the thread, the constructed person unraveled considerably faster than a real one would have.

CAROL

There is something almost exhausting about that — the ongoing maintenance a lie like that requires. It is not a single decision. It is a daily job, on top of the actual job, indefinitely.

MARTY

Cothren pleaded guilty and cooperated with the federal government. His cooperation became part of the case against Casada. Glen Casada was convicted. In September of twenty twenty-five, he was sentenced to three years in federal prison — a sentence handed down on charges of conspiracy and wire fraud rooted directly in the Phoenix Solutions scheme, the steered contracts, and the kickbacks flowing back to the Speaker.

CAROL

Three years for the Speaker of the House. I think about the people who voted for him — not the people who knew, not the people in the loop, but the ones who just showed up, marked their ballot, and thought they were choosing someone to

represent them.

MARTY

Those people are the silent ledger in a case like this. The scheme has a dollar figure attached to it, and the dollar figures here, while not in the hundreds of millions, were sufficient to warrant federal charges, a trial, and a conviction. But the cost to the people who believed the institution was functioning honestly is not quantifiable, and the verdict does not reimburse it.

MARTY

A single note of context: the pattern of a company existing primarily on paper, processing invoices while the real purpose is the movement of money back to the official who directs the work, appeared in a Los Angeles contracting case documented elsewhere in this series. The scale was different. The design was the same.

CAROL

That makes you wonder how many times this particular template has been used — whether it travels through networks the way a bad recipe does, passed along without anyone meaning to spread it.

MARTY

The template is as old as the invoice. What varies is the context — the office, the state, the industry. What stays constant is the reliance on routine. No one audits the ordinary with any urgency. No one questions the vendor that has always been on the list. A political mail company, in the middle of an election cycle, is background noise. That is the bet at the center of a scheme like this.

CAROL

And for a while, the bet paid off completely. That is the part I find difficult to sit with. It worked. Until the moment it did not, it worked.

MARTY

It worked because the institution trusted its own officers. A chief of staff is, by definition, the person who handles what the principal does not have time to examine closely. The trust is structural. The betrayal was structural too — not an opportunistic grab, but a scheme built into the daily functioning of the office itself.

CAROL

So what does Tennessee do with that now? The Speaker is gone, the chief of staff pleaded guilty, the company is dissolved. But the gap in oversight — the fact that one person had that much unsupervised access and used it this way for as long as

he did — that does not dissolve with the company.

MARTY

It does not, and that is the question the court record cannot answer on its own. The indictment names individuals. The sentence punishes individuals. What no sentence can mandate is the redesign of the oversight that allowed this to run, unremarked, for as long as it did. Glen Casada, convicted, received three years in September of twenty twenty-five. Cade Cothren, who pleaded guilty and cooperated, received a reduced sentence. Phoenix Solutions is gone. The fictitious identity is retired. The gavel in the Tennessee House has passed to someone else. Whether the lesson passed with it is a question that belongs to the voters and the institution, not the courtroom. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. Thank you for being here with us.