

SERIES: CORRUPT AMERICA ♦

# The Campaign Account Became a Personal Checkbook

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

### MARTY

The line item that stopped me was the rabbits. According to the federal indictment, Duncan Hunter, a United States congressman from California, charged his campaign account for the airfare to transport the family's pet rabbits to Washington. He also charged it for groceries, video games, family vacations, and hotel rooms. In total, he and his wife converted more than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars of campaign donations into personal spending. I'm Marty Shepard, and this is Corrupt America.

### CAROL

The rabbits. Not the vacations, not the groceries — the rabbits. Because whoever donated to that campaign was presumably thinking about roads, or veterans' benefits, or the border, and they ended up paying to relocate two rabbits.

### MARTY

That's a fair summary of the donor experience, yes. Hunter represented California's fiftieth district, a conservative stronghold east of San Diego, from two thousand and nine to two thousand and twenty. He'd been a marine, a combat veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, and he won his seat partly on that record. His father had held the same seat before him. He was, by every surface measure, the picture of a solid establishment congressman.

### CAROL

Which makes me wonder what the actual small donors — the people who wrote twenty-five-dollar checks at a county fair — thought they were investing in.

### MARTY

They thought they were investing in Duncan Hunter, representative. What the money actually funded, according to the federal indictment and, eventually, Hunter's own guilty plea, was a fairly wide-ranging set of personal conveniences. There were flights. There were hotel stays. There were charges at grocery stores and at a dental office. There were purchases at video game retailers. And there was, memorably, the airfare for the family's pets — which, to be fair to the

rabbits, they didn't ask to be congressman.

**CAROL**

The video games are what get me, honestly. A vacation you can at least dress up as a "constituent meeting." Video games are just video games.

**MARTY**

You could argue the groceries are even harder to dress up. At some point the word "campaign" stops doing any useful work. What federal prosecutors laid out was a pattern of treating the campaign account as a second household income — an account that existed because people believed in a candidate, and that got spent on the candidate's family's everyday life.

**CAROL**

My neighbour spent three years raising money for a community rink, a dollar at a time from bake sales, and I watched her reconcile every receipt at her kitchen table. The idea that someone else's money is yours to spend just because it arrived — she would find that completely alien.

**MARTY**

And federal law shares her instinct. Campaign funds exist for campaign purposes, and converting them to personal use is a federal crime. Hunter was originally charged in two thousand and eighteen alongside his wife, Margaret. The charges included wire fraud, falsifying campaign finance records, and a conspiracy count. The Hunters initially pleaded not guilty. Duncan Hunter publicly blamed his wife for the spending. Margaret Hunter later pleaded guilty and cooperated with prosecutors.

**CAROL**

He blamed his wife. While she was being prosecuted alongside him. I want to make sure I heard that correctly.

**MARTY**

You heard it correctly. She pleaded guilty to conspiracy in June two thousand and nineteen and agreed to cooperate with the government. Duncan Hunter continued to fight the charges for months after that, until December two thousand and nineteen, when he entered a guilty plea to a single count of conspiracy to convert campaign funds to personal use. He admitted to the core conduct. He was set to be sentenced, and then sentenced, to eleven months in federal custody — with prosecutors having sought twenty-one months.

**CAROL**

So at that point, the question is how long he's away, not whether he goes.

**MARTY**

That was the reasonable assumption. He was ordered to report to prison in the spring of two thousand and twenty, and the reporting date was delayed several times. And then on the first of December, two thousand and twenty — before he had served a single day of his sentence — President Donald Trump granted Duncan Hunter a full pardon.

**CAROL**

A full pardon. Not reduced time. Not early release. The whole thing erased.

**MARTY**

The whole thing, and that word matters: a pardon is not the same as a commutation, and the difference is one this series has had reason to visit before. A commutation ends the punishment — the prison time goes away, but the conviction remains on the record, the guilty plea stands, and the person is still, in the eyes of the law, a convicted felon. A pardon forgives the offence itself. It removes the legal finding. Duncan Hunter pleaded guilty to a federal felony, and after the pardon, it is as though, in the eyes of federal law, the conviction never happened.

**CAROL**

So the donors who were defrauded — their money is still gone, but the legal determination that something wrong was done to them is just cancelled.

**MARTY**

For federal purposes, that is essentially correct. The money those donors gave is long spent. Some of it paid for pet transport. None of it was coming back. The pardon didn't restore anything to the people who gave it; it simply removed the legal consequence for the man who spent it. And this is worth sitting with, because a commutation would have left Hunter a convicted felon who simply wasn't in prison anymore. A pardon left him a man whose guilty plea the law no longer recognises.

**CAROL**

I keep thinking about what it would feel like to be one of those small donors — to have given your money in good faith, to have watched a two-year prosecution, to have watched a guilty plea on the evening news, and then to open a browser and read that none of it counted anymore. That's not a legal question. That's just a feeling you'd carry home.

**MARTY**

That's the cost that doesn't appear in any sentencing memo. The I R S can quantify one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in converted funds. Federal prosecutors can file a count of conspiracy. A judge can impose eleven months. But the experience of a donor who trusted a candidate and watched that trust converted into a pet airline ticket — that doesn't have a line in any court document, and no pardon touches it either way.

**CAROL**

And there's no remedy that runs the other direction, is there? Nobody makes the donors whole.

**MARTY**

Nobody does. Margaret Hunter, for her part, received three years of probation in the autumn of two thousand and twenty. Her cooperation with prosecutors was a factor. She was not pardoned. The couple divorced. Duncan Hunter, having served no custodial time, returned to public life. The fiftieth district elected a new representative in two thousand and twenty. The court records remain, and they still contain the itemised list — the vacations, the hotel rooms, the dental visits, the video games, and the rabbits.

**CAROL**

There's something almost methodical about how ordinary the spending was. It wasn't some elaborate offshore scheme. It was the kind of thing anyone would buy — just charged to an account that belonged to other people.

**MARTY**

Which is, in a way, what makes the case instructive. Spectacular corruption has a kind of scale that distances it from ordinary life. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars spent on a family's groceries and hotel rooms and pets over several years is closer to something recognisable — not dramatic, just a sustained daily habit of treating someone else's money as your own. The legal system identified it, prosecuted it, obtained a guilty plea, and imposed a sentence. Then the pardon removed the legal finding. What it could not remove is the itemised receipt, which is still in the public record, and the name of every hotel, and the entry about the rabbits. The receipt survives the pardon.

**CAROL**

I find that slightly reassuring, actually. Not satisfying — just slightly reassuring.

**MARTY**

Duncan Hunter pleaded guilty to conspiracy to convert campaign funds to personal use in December two thousand and nineteen. He was sentenced to

eleven months in federal prison. He served none of it. He received a full presidential pardon on the first of December, two thousand and twenty. The conviction no longer stands. The receipts do. I'm Marty Shepard.

**CAROL**

And I'm Carol. Thanks for sitting with us.