

SERIES: CORRUPT AMERICA ♦

Gold Bars in the Senator's House

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

More than four hundred and eighty thousand dollars in cash was found stuffed into closets and jacket pockets in the home of a sitting United States senator — and the jackets had his name embroidered on the label. I'm Marty Shepard, and this is Corrupt America.

CAROL

His name. On the jackets. So at no point was there any confusion about whose money that was.

MARTY

None whatsoever. The senator is Bob Menendez of New Jersey, who spent nearly two decades in the United States Senate and served, for much of that time, on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — which, if you are a foreign government trying to get something done in Washington, is about the most useful seat in the building. He was convicted in July of twenty twenty-four on all counts, and sentenced to eleven years in federal prison in January of twenty twenty-five.

CAROL

Eleven years. That is not a fine and a letter of apology. That is a long portion of a life.

MARTY

It is. And the jury had quite a bit to work with. Alongside the cash, federal agents found gold bars. Physical gold. The government's theory, which the jury accepted, was that the money and the gold were not savings, not gifts, not campaign contributions. They were payments. Payments for official acts, performed by a man who held one of the more consequential committee assignments in American government.

CAROL

I keep stopping at the gold bars. Someone made a deliberate choice — not a wire transfer, not a check — but actual gold, in a house.

MARTY

Somebody thought that was the prudent approach. The two businessmen at the center of the case are Wael Hana, a New Jersey entrepreneur with connections to the Egyptian government, and Fred Daibes, a real-estate developer. Both were tried and convicted alongside Menendez. Hana received eight years. Daibes received seven. This was not a man operating alone.

CAROL

There's always someone on the other side of the transaction. Someone had to do the handing over.

MARTY

And the handover was specific. Among the items the government proved changed hands was a Mercedes-Benz, provided for Nadine Menendez, the senator's wife, whose case was eventually severed from her husband's proceedings. The gold and the cash accumulated over years. In return, prosecutors demonstrated, Menendez performed acts that went well beyond the ordinary pressures of political life.

CAROL

When you say acts — what kind? What did the money actually buy?

MARTY

Two things in particular stand out. First: Menendez passed information about United States Embassy personnel in Cairo to Egyptian government officials. Names of staff members serving inside an American embassy abroad. That is not a procedural favor. That is a sitting senator providing a foreign government with information about American personnel on foreign soil.

CAROL

I think about someone who took a posting in Cairo because it was good work, a useful career, a reasonable next step. They didn't know their name was in that conversation.

MARTY

They did not. The second act is almost more remarkable for how unremarkable it looked from the outside. Menendez ghostwrote a letter — a letter urging his Senate colleagues to release three hundred million dollars in military aid to Egypt — and then arranged for other senators to sign and send it as though it were their own considered position. He wrote it. He did not sign it. His colleagues had no way of knowing where the argument had actually originated.

CAROL

That one lands differently. Because everyone who signed that letter thought they were exercising their own judgment. They weren't. Someone had already written the conclusion and collected payment beforehand.

MARTY

The defense argued, among other things, that the cash at home reflected a longstanding personal habit — a distrust of banks rooted in his family's history. That argument went before the jury. The jury heard it, considered it carefully over several weeks of trial, and rejected it on every count.

CAROL

Four hundred and eighty thousand dollars is a considerable amount of distrust of banks. I know people who keep a little cash in an envelope. This is a different kind of envelope.

MARTY

It is a different envelope entirely. And there is context worth naming: this was not the first time the federal government had brought charges against Bob Menendez. In twenty seventeen, a first round of charges ended in a hung jury and was subsequently dismissed. The government came back. The second jury did not hang.

CAROL

The second time. That tells you something about how safe a person must have felt.

MARTY

It does. He was, at the time of his arrest in twenty twenty-three, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Not a member — the chairman. The charges the jury ultimately upheld included acting as an agent of a foreign government. That phrase has a precise legal meaning. It also has a plain-English meaning. In this case, the jury found that both applied.

CAROL

Agent of a foreign government. He was elected to represent New Jersey.

MARTY

New Jersey, and by virtue of his committee role, in some meaningful sense the country. The eleven-year sentence is among the longest ever handed to a sitting or former member of Congress. Wael Hana is serving eight years. Fred Daibes is serving seven. Menendez has appealed, as is his right, and what an appellate court ultimately does remains its own story.

CAROL

I keep thinking about the voters. Not as an abstraction — just people who looked at the name on the ballot and thought they understood what they were choosing. What was actually happening in that office on their behalf?

MARTY

That is the cost the sentencing memo cannot calculate. The committee votes, the conversations with foreign officials, the colleagues who signed a letter they believed was their own thinking — the full shape of what went differently because of these arrangements may not ever be fully knowable. That is what separates this kind of corruption from a simple expense-account scandal. The damage runs through decisions, not just dollars.

CAROL

It's like finding out later that someone was steering choices for you. The specific decision they tilted — sometimes you never find out which one it was.

MARTY

And the gold bars stay in the picture precisely because they are so concrete. Everything else — the letters, the embassy names — requires some understanding of how government works before you can feel the full weight of it. The gold bars you can picture without any help. They were in a house. They were placed there in exchange for public trust, and stored next to a jacket with a man's name on it. That is not a metaphor. That is what the jury found. Bob Menendez was convicted on all counts in July of twenty twenty-four. Wael Hana and Fred Daibes were convicted alongside him. The sentences are established fact. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

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