

SERIES: CORRUPT AMERICA ♦

The Congressman Who Invented Himself

An Al Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Not one line of his biography checked out. Not the universities, not the Wall Street firms, not the family history that stretched back to the Holocaust, not the charity, not the money. I'm Marty Shepard, and this is Corrupt America.

CAROL

When you say it like that — not one line — it takes a moment to actually land. Most people who lie pad a résumé a little. This was a different exercise entirely.

MARTY

George Santos was elected in November of twenty twenty-two to represent New York's third congressional district, a stretch of Long Island and Queens. He ran as a self-made success: degrees from Baruch College and New York University, experience at Goldman Sachs and Citigroup, a thriving investment firm of his own called the Devolder Organization. He described himself as Jewish, said his grandparents had fled the Holocaust, mentioned a family connection to the September eleventh attacks. None of these things survived scrutiny — which arrived, unfortunately for the voters, only after the election.

CAROL

That timing is the part I keep returning to. A reporter checked, and the whole thing unraveled in a weekend, basically. Weeks after he had already won.

MARTY

The investigation that followed — by federal prosecutors, not just reporters — found something considerably more serious than an inflated résumé. The Federal Election Commission filings listed loans Santos had allegedly made to his own campaign from his company. Prosecutors said the company had earned essentially nothing. There were charges related to collecting New York State unemployment benefits during a period when he was, by other accounts, employed. And then there were the donors.

CAROL

You mentioned the donors and I want to stay there for a moment, because I think that is where it gets most human. These are not abstract victims. These are people who believed in this man and handed over their financial information.

MARTY

Among the twenty-three counts to which he eventually pleaded guilty were aggravated identity theft and wire fraud charges related to individual donors. In at least some cases, prosecutors said, he had obtained donors' credit card details — under the guise of processing a contribution — and used them for other purposes. What the guilty plea established as settled fact was that real people had real money taken by someone they had trusted enough to vote for.

CAROL

It has the shape of the oldest confidence trick there is. Someone arrives in a place where nobody knows him, sells everyone on a thing that will never exist, collects the money, and expects to be gone before anyone thinks to check. What strikes me here is that he did not even need to leave. He got sworn in.

MARTY

And that is the part worth understanding, because a con of this kind does not work by making people foolish. It works by selling them a story about themselves. Santos sold voters a story about the kind of person they wanted representing them: a Jewish American success, the son of immigrants, a man who had built something real and wanted to give back. The lie was not accidental. It was load-bearing.

CAROL

And once you believe a story like that, you stop checking the details. The story does the vetting for you.

MARTY

He was expelled from the House of Representatives in December of twenty twenty-three — only the sixth member in the entire history of that institution to be removed that way. In August of twenty twenty-four he pleaded guilty to twenty-three counts: wire fraud, money laundering, aggravated identity theft, among others. A federal judge sentenced him to eighty-seven months — just over seven years — and ordered him to pay restitution to the people the plea identified as victims. He surrendered to begin that sentence in July of twenty twenty-five.

CAROL

Eighty-seven months. That is a real number. That is longer than he would have served in Congress even if they had never expelled him. I thought — finally, here

is the end of the story.

MARTY

On the seventeenth of October, twenty twenty-five, the president commuted his sentence. Santos had been in federal custody for roughly three months. I want to be precise here, because the distinction matters: a commutation is not a pardon. A pardon forgives the offence and clears the record. A commutation ends the punishment. Santos's conviction stands. The guilty plea to twenty-three counts is a permanent matter of federal record. What changed on the seventeenth of October was that the remaining eighty-four months did not have to be served.

CAROL

So the conviction stays. I think a lot of people will hear the word commutation and assume it means the same thing as a pardon. It does not, and the difference matters here.

MARTY

It matters most for the victims. Because the commutation also cancelled the restitution Santos owed. The money those donors were supposed to recover — the amounts tied to the credit card fraud and the wire fraud described in the plea — that obligation ended along with the sentence. The record says he did it. The record no longer requires him to pay for it.

CAROL

The people who had their card information taken, who trusted him with a contribution and had that trust used against them — they just do not get made whole. That is where it lands for me. Not the politics, not the prison time, but the people who lost money and the legal mechanism that was supposed to fix that has been switched off.

MARTY

That is the human cost the case leaves behind, and it is worth naming plainly. There is also a larger question the case raises but does not answer: what is a criminal sentence actually for? If the answer is punishment, deterrence, and repair of harm, you can measure what was lost when a sentence is shortened by ninety-six percent and the repair portion is cancelled. If the answer is something else, the case invites you to say what.

CAROL

And the voters of that district — they went through a special election after the expulsion, started over entirely. I imagine some of them are still just bewildered. They did not lose a congressman they disagreed with. They lost a congressman

who never existed.

MARTY

That is the detail I keep returning to. New York's third district sent a fiction to Washington. It sat on committees, cast votes, gave floor speeches for just over a year — and not one credential that got it there was real. The Federal Election Commission filings were public. The résumé was checkable. A journalist did check it, weeks after the election. Why no one checked before the votes were counted is not a question the criminal case answers. That one belongs to everyone.

CAROL

George Santos pleaded guilty to twenty-three counts. That part is settled. Everything that came after — three months served, a cancelled debt, a conviction left standing on its own — that is the part we are still sorting out.

MARTY

Twenty-three counts, three months served, a conviction that stands, and an obligation to his victims that was erased when the sentence was. He is, as things stand, the only member of Congress to have been expelled and then convicted of the crimes that prompted the expulsion — which is a distinction that commutations cannot reach. Whatever he claimed to be, the record of what he admitted to doing is permanent, and it has his name on it. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

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