

## Burma's Image Problem Is a Moneymaker for U.S. Lobbyists

R. Jeffrey Smith

Washington Post Staff Writer

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The military rulers of Burma are well aware they have an image problem in Washington. The Clinton administration and human rights groups regularly recount how the generals took office by hijacking a 1990 election, keep hundreds of opponents in inhumane prisons and solicit investments from Asian drug lords.

But a bad image can mean big business for Washington's public relations and lobbying firms. Several firms have been conducting a campaign on Burma's behalf in classic Washington style -- producing upbeat newsletters, arranging seminars and interviews and funding all-expense-paid trips -- partly to persuade the Clinton administration to lift trade sanctions against the regime.

For a fee of nearly a half-million dollars, for example, a Burmese company that U.S. officials say is close to the military leadership last year hired a former assistant secretary of state for narcotics control, Ann Wrobleski, and her lobbying firm, Jefferson Waterman International, to communicate the company's "*positions and interests*," according to the contract. Wrobleski is well known to the regime from her counter-narcotics work, which occurred when Burma was becoming the principal exporter of heroin sold on U.S. streets.

Another, well-connected firm in Burma's capital of Rangoon hired a public relations firm and a lobbying firm last year, paying \$252,000 to former television reporter Jackson Bain to help the Burmese Embassy burnish the country's reputation, and an undisclosed sum to the Atlantic Group, a lobbying and public relations company that is working more directly to help overturn the U.S. sanctions.

In addition, various U.S. corporations that want to do business with Burma or already invest there, including the California-based energy company, Unocal Corp., have been spending money to promote the idea that Washington's barriers to new U.S. trade with Burma do not reflect a politically sound U.S. strategy. The sanctions, which President Clinton imposed last May, bar new investment by U.S. firms in commercial or energy projects.

An educational and advocacy organization here called The International Center drew on donations from such corporations to help fund a trip in October by three former high-ranking Defense Department and State Department officials, who met with top military officials as well as with noted opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi, the winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize for her anti-regime activities.

The three former officials, Morton I. Abramowitz, Richard L. Armitage and Michael H. Armacost, subsequently sent their policy advice to national security adviser Samuel R. "Sandy" Berger and briefed lawmakers and staff on Capitol

Hill.

In a private letter to Berger, the three men counseled that some sanctions should remain in place, but urged that Washington try to adopt a more flexible approach permitting international loans for health care and education. Eventually, they added, Washington should reconsider keeping any unilateral sanctions on Burma. "Sanctions over time will become a wasting asset and slow Burma's exposure to the outside world," they wrote.

The administration has given no hint that it plans to relax Burma sanctions.

Unocal, which has a 28 percent stake in a billion-dollar natural gas project in Burma, gave \$50,000 to The International Center last July, after hearing from Frances Zwenig, the center's director, about the trip proposal in March. But Zwenig said the funds were not intermingled with those of the other corporations that helped underwrite the trip.

Unocal also donated funds last year to Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service to help fund a Capitol Hill seminar series on Asian nations that is to include a presentation this spring on Myanmar, the name assigned to the country by the junta. James C. Clad, a research professor at the school, declined to say how much the company gave. Corporations "*pay but they also get the full spectrum of people*" with different views at the seminars, he said.

Maureen Aung-Thwin, who directs the Soros foundation's Open Society Institute Burma project, complained that the reception Burma gets from such institutions in Washington "*sends really mixed signals to a government that is beginning to feel the pressure of the isolation and the sanctions.*"

Lobbyists promoting a positive image of Burma say that they are doing nothing wrong. Bain said he knows the Burmese government is repressive and "*not ready for prime time.*" But he said he enjoys the challenge of trying to disseminate information that gives a fuller picture of the country.

The work is an uphill battle. According to the State Department's most recent public report on Burma, covering the six-month period ending last September, the Burmese regime "*made no progress*" in moving toward democratization and continued its "*severe violations*" of human rights. "*Money from the illicit trafficking of narcotics likely accounts for a substantial net inflow*" of the nation's foreign currency receipts, the U.S. report said. Hundreds of political prisoners were still subject to "deplorable" conditions, while universities remained shuttered for a second year to help stifle popular dissent.

U.S. officials say they have no evidence that either of the two principal Burmese firms that fund lobbying here is implicated in narcotics-related activities.

Jefferson Waterman International signed a contract in February to provide

*"various professional, strategic counsel and public relations services to"* a company in Rangoon called Myanmar Resource Development Ltd., including arranging meetings with U.S. and congressional officials, according to a foreign-agent registration statement filed with the Justice Department by Wrobleski, the firm's president. The fee is \$400,000 plus as much as \$100,000 in annual expenses.

The filing describes Myanmar Resource Development Ltd. as a privately owned company that invests in Burma. But several U.S. officials said they believe it is either closely connected with the military regime or an arm of its leadership, and internal State Department cables have identified Jefferson Waterman as the "U.S.-based lobbying firm" for the junta itself.

Wrobleski, who worked as a projects director for Nancy Reagan before becoming assistant secretary of state in 1986, was instrumental in denying Burma U.S. anti-narcotics aid following social unrest there in 1989. She said then that Burma was unlikely to make progress in countering narcotics *"until a government enjoying greater credibility and support among the Burmese people than the current military regime is seated in Rangoon."*

That regime remains in place, but Wrobleski's firm recently expressed a more upbeat viewpoint, advertising Burma in one of its periodic Myanmar Monitor newsletters as a *"beautiful and exotic country . . . [that] offers much to tourists, photographers, scuba divers, historians and others."* Another newsletter published by the firm repeated the junta's claim that the United States had engaged in terrorism by helping fund the work of a dissident group outside the country.

Asked for comment, Wrobleski refused to answer any questions about her firm's work, saying *"we don't discuss what we do for our clients"* or any related issues.

Bain, a former White House correspondent for NBC News and anchorman for WRC-TV, runs his Alexandria-based consulting firm, Bain and Associates, with his wife Sandy Bain, a former free-lance contributor to The Washington Post.

Their filing with the Justice Department states that they earn a monthly fee of \$21,000 from Zay Ka Bar Company Ltd. of Rangoon, a private, 50-employee firm involved in the construction and development of hotels and other real estate. But U.S. officials say they believe the Burmese company is engaged in business deals with members of the country's leadership, and Bain says this may be true.

A series of internal documents from Bain's firm, which was provided to The Post by sources who asked not to be named, provides a window into how Washington public relations firms conduct a campaign on behalf of an unpopular client.

The memos outline an ambitious plan, for example, to improve the country's image through a series of *"defensive and pro-active"* measures, including booking speeches by sympathetic businessmen and journalists, arranging

luncheon briefings with embassy personnel, *"coordination of key messages"* with U.S. companies seeking deals in Burma, and *"placement of stories through reporter/editor contact."*

Bain said in his Sept. 3 Justice Department filing that his client was not a part of the government. But his firm has repeatedly sent its advice directly to the Burmese ambassador in Washington, Tin Winn, or his deputy, Thaung Tun, according to the documents. Progress reports on its work were sent directly to Lt. Col. Hla Min, director of the defense ministry's office of strategic studies and the regime's chief publicist.

On Nov. 12, according to one memo, Bain complained to Thaung Tun that *"the last invoice for expenses and November retainer has not been paid,"* totaling \$31,723. He said in an interview that this was merely an effort to enlist the embassy's assistance in putting pressure on Zay Ka Bar.

Last July was a particularly challenging month for Burma's backers after Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, attending a meeting of Asian nations, called Burma the only nation in the group that had refused to honor election results, and had banned fax machines, had closed universities, and *"protects and profits from the drug trade."* Zwenig was Chief of Staff to former UN Ambassador Albright.

Bain bounced back in August with a promise that *"we are actively cultivating"* reporters and editors, and told his client in September that what the country needed was some "positive, media-quality photos."

In October, he reported that *"we are working on scheduling editorial board meetings with the Washington Post and the Washington Times. We have hand-selected our targets at these papers and have begun efforts to arrange meetings for Amb. Rabb and Minister Thaung Tun."*

The reference was to Maxwell Rabb, President Ronald Reagan's ambassador to Italy, who said in an interview that after visiting Burma last year, he concluded the country is getting a *"bum rap."* Rabb's daughter, Priscilla Ayres, is married to Larry Ayres, the head of the Atlantic Group and a lobbyist for Zay Ka Bar.

A meeting was arranged at the Washington Times that resulted in a story that quoted the Burmese ambassador saying the country had waged a successful fight against drugs and encouraged a multiparty system. No meeting occurred at The Post.

In an effort to suggest that Burma is taking its anti-drug responsibilities more seriously than Washington alleges, for example, Jefferson Waterman is offering an all-expenses-paid trip to Burma next month for U.S. journalists *"to hear the government's side,"* according to an official of the firm. Bain is paying for a similar trip for U.S. and foreign journalists this week.

Frances Zwenig, who organized the earlier trip to Burma by three former senior U.S. officials, is a former staff member for Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) who now runs the Burma/Myanmar Forum for The International Group. In a letter to the president of Unocal last March, she promoted the idea of "*bringing a high-level group*" to the country, according to a copy of her letter.

The credentials of the group she assembled are indeed impressive. Abramowitz was ambassador to Thailand from 1978 to 1983 and Turkey from 1989 to 1991 and president of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace from 1991 to 1997.

Armacost was ambassador to the Philippines from 1982 to 1984 and Japan from 1988 to 1993. Armitage was assistant secretary of defense in the mid-1980s.

Zwenig said she wrote to "*lots of corporations*" to obtain funding for the trip, including some that do business with Burma now and some that simply oppose any U.S. sanctions -- but she declined to name them. In a July 29 letter to the Washington-based director of the Boeing Corp.'s commercial aircraft division, Zwenig noted for example that "*a lot is demanded just now of those who are concerned about the U.S.-Myanmar relationship*" and said she hoped "*we will be able to work together*" to fund the estimated \$75,000 cost of the trip.

Boeing, which hopes to gain the right to sell aircraft to the Burmese government, subsequently contributed \$5,000 toward the trip, according to Maria Sheehan, a spokeswoman for the company. She added that Boeing has also contributed funds to underwrite lobbying by a consortium of companies, known as USA-Engage, that was formed to fight state laws barring investments in Burma and promote the withdrawal of various federal trade sanctions.

Zwenig, on Sept. 19, sent a draft schedule for the trip to Tun, at the embassy, saying "I would like you all to review it and help me edit it," according to a copy of her letter.

Asked at a Nov. 5 briefing for congressional staff members if they had any reservations about having embarked on a trip funded by commercial investors in Burma, Armitage said he would have reservations "*had we been working for any investors*" but added, "*I don't know that we knew who was paying for the trip.*" Abramowitz said "*we went without any agenda*" on a trip that was funded by The International Center. "We didn't go to work for anybody and I find the question offensive," Abramowitz added.