

*Casino Jack*, a movie about the disgraced American lobbyist Jack Abramoff, begins with the title character delivering a defiant monologue to the mirror in a public washroom. A self-serving paean to unrepentant individualism, ladder-climbing and egotism disguised as family feeling, the speech is superbly delivered by a pugilistic Kevin Spacey, jabbing at his reflection with his

toothbrush. Also reviewed this week [The Mechanic suffers from dirt in the fuel line](#) [Dogtooth](#)  
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If only

### *Casino Jack*

remained this tightly focused on Abramoff, the Jewish philanthropist cum fraud artist, and Spacey's fascinating performance. But the film has a complicated political story to tell, and its erratically suspenseful narrative often detracts from its central interest – what makes Abramoff tick. How does he reconcile his daily prayers with gouging native tribes for lobbying fees? Director George Hickenlooper, who died from an accidental painkiller overdose while promoting the newly completed film last fall, is determined to cover all the angles and stick to the facts. A real news clip included with the credits reveals that one scene recreated an actual political event word for word. The result, unfortunately, is a two-headed plot associated with locations – a cruise-ship casino and a native reservation – in which Abramoff is not physically present. The storytelling ranges from cleverly concise (Abramoff buying the Zamboni before the hockey rink is built) to painfully awkward (newspaper clippings flashed on the screen.) A lifelong Republican activist, Abramoff (who recently completed a jail sentence for fraud and conspiracy) built up his lobbying business making sure that minimum-wage laws were not applied to offshore sweatshops and keeping the taxman away from native casinos. In the film, his downfall is assured when he simultaneously attempts to buy the floating casino on credit, open two swank Washington restaurants and a Hebrew day school – and hit up a Michigan tribe for fraudulent fees to pay for it all. In Spacey's masterful hands, Abramoff is intelligent, charismatic, driven, impulsive – and apparently genuinely religious. God, he tells his politically connected Bible study group, wants us to be liquid. Abramoff, who resorts to Al Pacino impersonations whenever he's in the hot seat, is an intriguing mix of contradictions and hypocrisies, while his lieutenant and disciple Michael Scanlon (Barry Pepper) is a simpler kind of scum, just grossly acquisitive and a philanderer. Both on board the ship and on the reservation, it is Scanlon who does the dirty work: Pepper's performance is deliciously manic, but the film's focus becomes diffused. On the cruise ship side of the story, actor Jon Lovitz delivers an amusing organized-crime shtick in the role of Abramoff's front man, admirably supported by Daniel Kash and the late Maury Chaykin – two of many familiar Canadian faces that pop up in a movie that was shot here. Meanwhile, Graham Greene is seriously underemployed as Bernie Sprague, the one tribal leader who stands up to the lobbyists. There, a classic tale of a crusade against corruption that goes all the way to Senate hearings is played out in a few anti-climatic scenes, while the cruise ship sails towards farce. Where is Abramoff/Spacey in any of it? During those Senate hearings, Abramoff continually pleaded the fifth. In the movie, Spacey breaks into a vicious tirade against the hypocrisy of the senators who once took his campaign contributions and now sit in judgment on him. His rendition of this misplaced rage and grotesque self-justification is a wonder to behold – until it turns out that it's merely a fantasy sequence and

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Written by Administrator

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we settle back into Abramoff's actual silence. The facts really get in the way of the portrait here, and we are left hungry for more Spacey and more insight into a man with the hubris to wonder if he has disappointed God. His tearful wife asks, "What about me and the kids?" Moviegoers might want to add native people, U.S. taxpayers and themselves to that list.

**Casino Jack**

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