

South Dakota's Globe-Trotting Senator Larry Pressler's World Tour

One of the most vulnerable Republicans in the November elections is Larry Pressler of South Dakota, now fighting desperately to save the US Senate seat he has disgraced since 1978. In a bid to appeal to his state's austere voters, Pressler, locked in a tight race with Tim Johnson, portrays himself as a stern steward of taxpayer money, a supporter of a balanced budget and a modest sort who can empathize with the common man and woman.

In fact, Pressler is one of the most profligate members of Congress. He has spent vast sums of taxpayer money crisscrossing the globe on preposterous "fact-finding missions", used ample piles of campaign and official money for his personal expenses and abused his office by employing an aide whose sole duty is to serve as Pressler's full-time chauffeur.

Pressler's favorite way to spend other people's money is by billing the Treasury for his many junkets abroad. We learned this from a Freedom of Information Act request and a search of public records. During his past term in Congress, Pressler visited Mexico, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Italy (several times), Finland, the former Soviet Union, England, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Surinam, Germany, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Holland, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, Singapore, Senegal, Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda, Central African Republic and Nigeria.

This list includes *only* trips taken as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where Pressler served between 1991 and 1994. During the past six years, Pressler traveled abroad more than any other member of the Committee — fourteen times, versus nine for second-place finisher Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, who chaired Foreign Relations for four years. Pressler also traveled extensively in the US and made further foreign trips as a member of the Commerce Committee, among other senatorial junkets. During the 1991-92 period, Pressler made at least one and often two foreign trips per month.

Pressler claims his travels are part of his official duties. But those familiar with his excursions say Pressler's prime goal is rest and relaxation, as well as getting as many passport stamps as possible. During a 1991 visit to the Caribbean, Pressler met with Fidel Castro in Cuba but otherwise accomplished little. On a swing through the Dominican Republic after his stopover in Cuba, Pressler was put up at a splendid resort, Casa del Campo, which is owned by the Fanjul family, the Florida sugar barons. There he played golf and went on a helicopter tour.

Pressler also visited Switzerland, where his primary mission was to hit the ski slopes. He frequently visits London to see Oxford chums and because he enjoys the city's lively theater scene. Pressler once saw an Ariel Dorfman play in London, which, to justify the visit, he reviewed enthusiastically from the Senate floor.

During a 1992 swing through Eastern Europe, Pressler made a brief trip to

Uzbekistan. After visiting the capital of Tashkent he directed his Air Force plane to land in Samarkand, a lovely city on the ancient silk road to China, where he visited the famous market. Returning to the US, Pressler argued on the floor of the Senate that the US should help Uzbekistan's tourist industry because the country suffered from "poor hotel facilities, costly travel, costly service which must be paid for in hard currency and a lack of tourism know-how".

Pressler was desperate to go to Rio de Janeiro for the 1992 Earth Summit and lobbied fiercely to get one of the prized seats on the official Senate delegation led by then-Tennessee Senator Al Gore. In a bold stroke that landed him on the flight, Pressler, who had never before demonstrated an interest in environmental issues — he received a zero rating from the League of Conservation Voters last year — praised Gore's book *Earth in the Balance* in a speech to his colleagues.

Pressler's frequent excursions have cost taxpayers over a million dollars. The fuel alone for a 13-day excursion to Africa in 1993 was \$110,758, according to gov-

Sequel: Contributions Watch Conspiracy

Our report on Philip Morris's bogus "watchdog group", Contributions Watch, caused a big media stir. We provided our documents to *The Washington Post* and ABC TV Nightly News, both of which produced major reports on the subject. The story was also picked up by all the principal wire services and dozens of regional papers in the US.

State Affairs, the pr firm which used the tobacco cartel's money to set up Contributions Watch, now is claiming that it was all a big mistake and that the company regrets that it wasn't more "transparent". Philip Morris has taken the same tack, claiming that it would have been happy to admit its links to Contributions Watch, but no one had previously asked. Of course, the documents we exposed show clearly that both the pr firm and the cigarette maker desperately sought to conceal their links to their bogus watchdog.

Contributions Watch itself appears to be dead. The funders the group was

applying to for financial support will no doubt shun the outfit, as will the reporters who previously did stories praising the group's investigations.

On another front, a story in *CounterPunch* has been hailed as instrumental in helping defeat the dolphin death bill. It seems that White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta bluntly told Al Gore that the accusations that drug cartels supported the end of the embargo rendered the bill dead in the water.

Craig van Note of the Monitor Consortium of Conservation Groups thanked us in these words: "*CounterPunch* saved the dolphin! Until you printed your exposé of the links between the Colombian cartels, the Mexican tuna industry and the White House dolphin death bill, it looked as if the bad guys were winning the day. But *CounterPunch* helped beat Al Gore's army, all the way from Barbara Dudley's Greenpeace to Tim Wirth. Your explosive disclosures made all the difference." ■

ernment records. Then there's the cost of putting up Pressler and his guests at expensive hotels, paying for the crew's time — during the trip to Eastern Europe Pressler's plane carried a crew of six to serve Pressler, two aides and an Air Force officer — as well as maintenance and airport landing fees.

Pressler has also traveled widely within the United States. In 1992, he convinced Senators Bob Dole and George Mitchell to appoint him as one of two senators who serve a one-year term as an honorary delegate to the United Nations. Pressler milked this assignment for all it was worth, taking repeated trips to New York. He settled in at the UN Plaza Hotel, where rates rise upward from \$200 per night for a single room.

To finance his treks across the US, Pressler makes generous use of his campaign funds. In 1992 alone he spent \$142,000 on domestic travel to every region of the country.

Since it's illicit for Pressler to use campaign money for personal travel, he claims that his domestic trips are related to fundraising activities and are therefore legal. Yet in 1992 Pressler raised a total of \$72,535, roughly half of the reported costs of his fundraising trips. He told Dwight Morris of *PoliticsNow*, an internet publication, that bills of \$4,700 for hotel stays in New York in 1991 were all related to fundraising duties. But Morris found that during all of 1991, Pressler raised just \$4,500 from \$200-and-up contributors in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Pressler is notorious for never paying for anything out of his own pocket. He continually uses official money to cover personal business. Between 1991 and 1994, he billed taxpayers \$83,680.38 to cover his expenses while junketing

abroad for Foreign Relations. Since 1991 he has charged his campaign for at least \$75,000 in meals, among them a \$633.43 feast at the Ritz Carlton and a \$347.09 extravaganza at Washington's Galileo restaurant. He also once used \$1,195 from his campaign money to pay for opera tickets.

This follows a long-standing pattern of Pressler's extravagant use of campaign and public money. Back in 1989, Pressler's campaign doled out \$2,000 to a woman who disclosure reports said had provided "catering services". When the

In the Dominican Republic, Pressler golfed happily at a resort owned by Florida sugar barons.

woman in question, Nellie Origaen, was asked what she was paid for, she said that she had cleaned Pressler's townhouse "every week, that's all".

When not jetting around at taxpayer expense or on campaign funds, Pressler's tourism is financed by the special interest groups he is supposed to oversee from his perch as chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee. Last year he took at least five such trips, including a swing to a Las Vegas telecommunications conference financed by the National Association of Broadcasters and a "fact-finding event" to Belgium paid for by Dow Jones Publishing, Inc. A four-night trip to Park City, Utah in 1993, where he attended the Senator's Ski Cup Charity Event, was covered by US West.

Pressler knew that revelations of his extravagant taxpayer-subsidized habits could hurt him during his re-election campaign. So he sharply curtailed his travel during the last third of his current term. He has taken other steps to minimize his ostentatious spending as well. Until last year Pressler was whisked about Washington in a leased Lincoln town car, but as the election approached he prudently traded this model in for a more modest vehicle.

Pressler's Washington driver is Todd Trautman. He's listed by Pressler's office

as a legislative assistant, but in fact has few duties other than to serve as the senator's full-time chauffeur. Trautman has ferried Pressler on trips as near as a few blocks — to the Capitol building so the senator could cast a vote — and as far as New York, during Pressler's tenure as a UN delegate.

Trautman and the rest of Pressler's staff have the thankless task of covering up for their boss's incompetence while contending with his imperious demands and routine temper tantrums. Chief-of-Staff Doug Miller, a mild-mannered former professor, has suffered steady abuse from his boss for more than a decade, resulting in health problems. Pressler fired his secretary, Ramona Lessen, after fourteen years of service because, one well-informed source recounts, she "didn't smile enough". (Lessen, who now works for Tennessee Senator Bill Frist, declined to comment on this account.) After seeing the film *Jurassic Park*, Pressler developed a keen interest in dinosaurs. He ordered his former press secretary Christi Stewart to research the subject and prepare a scrap book for him on the topic. "Pressler likes his people bowing and scraping," one Senate staffer tells us. ■

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Those Ten Million Jobs

Clinton's big claim is that he and Al Gore have created ten million new jobs. The Department of Labor has listed the top occupations furnishing this employment. They are: fast food servers, retail clerks, janitors, waiters and waitresses. ■