



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION  
Washington, DC 20463

CERTIFIED MAIL  
RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

ADVISORY OPINION 1995-19

Subodh Chandra, Treasurer  
Indian-American Leadership Investment Fund  
3939 Rio Grande Blvd.  
#57  
Albuquerque, NM 87107-3153

Dear Mr. Chandra:

This responds to your letter dated May 25, 1995, requesting an advisory opinion on behalf of the Indian- American Leadership Investment Fund ("the Fund") concerning the application of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended ("the Act"), and Commission regulations to the disposition of contributions received by the Fund that may be unlawful under the Act.

The Fund is a nonconnected political committee which has been registered with the Commission since August 16, 1993. You state that, on April 27 and 28, 1995, you met with a reporter from the Baltimore Sun who informed you that he had conducted an investigation of contributors to the Fund from the Baltimore area. The reporter indicated that some of these individuals "did not appear to have the financial means" to make contributions in the amount that they gave. The reporter also suggested that some of these contributors had been improperly reimbursed for making contributions. You state that the "specificity and seriousness of the reporter's allegations" led you to notify the Commission by facsimile transmission, sent on April 28, that there may have been violations of the Act. The Commission's Office of General Counsel informed you that your letter will be treated as a sua sponte submission, subject to investigation by the Commission.

An article by the reporter containing these allegations appeared in the May 3 issue of the Baltimore Sun. This article referred to the fact that \$34,900 in contributions from the Baltimore area were received by the Fund in one day. It contains specific assertions by some contributors identified in the Fund's reports that they were reimbursed for their donations. The article also

contains specific information as to the conduct of the alleged original contributor and other circumstances surrounding some of the donations.

All of the contributions to the Fund from contributors in Maryland were transmitted to you by a Baltimore attorney. You assert that, when the contributions were received, you, as treasurer, examined them for evidence of illegality and found that the contributions did not present a question of their legality. The contributions were thus deposited in the Fund's account and drawn upon. You state that, as yet, you "have no information verifying the illegality of any of these contributions" other than what was ultimately reported in the Baltimore Sun. You note that the Federal Bureau of Investigation has asked you for information and documents, which you have provided.

In view of Commission regulations addressing refunds by a political committee of unlawful contributions, you propose two alternative courses of action for the Fund. Under your first proposal, the Fund would mail letters to Maryland contributors describing the proper criteria for contributions, including the invalidity of reimbursed contributions. The letter would also request a signed statement "confirming the legality of contributions made." The second proposal provides that the Fund would obtain the telephone numbers of all the Maryland contributors, contact those contributors by phone, and request their oral confirmation of the legality of the contributions. You, as treasurer, would memorialize these conversations in a written memorandum.

You ask whether either or both of the proposed courses of action are required or permitted by Commission regulations. You also ask whether it is "advisable" for the Fund to undertake either course of action. Finally, you ask if there are any additional courses of action that would be required, permitted, or advisable.

A contribution by a person who is reimbursed in advance or afterward by another person or entity is unlawful under the Act because it is a "contribution in the name of another." 2 U.S.C. 441f; 11 CFR 110.4(b)(1)(i). It is also unlawful for a committee to knowingly accept such a contribution. 2 U.S.C. 441f; 11 CFR 110.4(b)(1)(iv).

Commission regulations prescribe the obligations of a committee treasurer upon receipt of a contribution that appears unlawful or presents genuine questions of illegality when received, or upon discovery of the contribution's unlawful nature at a later date.

Contributions that, when received, present genuine questions as to whether they were made by corporations, labor organizations, foreign nationals, or Federal contractors may be either deposited into a campaign depository or returned to the contributor within ten days of the receipt. If such a contribution is deposited, the treasurer must make his or her best efforts to determine the legality of the contribution. The treasurer must make at least one written or oral request for evidence of the legality. Such evidence includes, but is not limited to, a written statement from the contributor explaining why the contribution is legal, or a written statement by the treasurer memorializing an oral communication from the contributor to that effect. If the contribution cannot be determined to be legal, the treasurer must refund it to the contributor within thirty days of its receipt. 11 CFR 103.3(b)(1).

If the treasurer determined at the time the contribution was received and deposited that it did not appear to be from an unlawful source or made in the name of another, but "later discovers that it is illegal based on new evidence not available to the political committee at the time of receipt and deposit," the contribution must be refunded to the contributor within thirty days of the discovery of the illegality. If the committee does not have sufficient funds to refund the contribution at the time the illegality is discovered, it must make the refund from the next funds it receives. 11 CFR 103.3(b)(2).

In several opinions, the Commission has reviewed situations involving the requirement to subsequently refund contributions made in the names of others. See Advisory Opinions 1991-39, 1989-5, and 1984-52. In Advisory Opinions 1989-5 and 1984-52, the Commission addressed circumstances in which the corporation that actually contributed the funds at issue or its corporate employees (or both) had pled guilty to criminal charges related to the making of the contributions. As stated in Advisory Opinion 1991-39, those two opinions, however, did not limit to guilty pleas the circumstances in which a refund obligation can be said to arise.

Advisory Opinion 1991-39 presented a situation in which a political committee received a letter from the Department of Justice indicating that contributions, reported by the committee as received from several persons, had actually been made by one individual who had been indicted by a Federal grand jury. Upon receipt of the DOJ letter, the committee had determined that there was a basis for the appearance of illegality and "segregated" the funds by depositing an amount sufficient to cover the questioned contributions so that the amount would be available if and when the Commission determined that a committee disbursement was warranted. The indicted individual asserted his innocence.

Noting that the Federal evidentiary test for a grand jury indictment was whether there was probable cause to believe the accused had committed the crime, the Commission determined that the DOJ letter and the indictment "provided sufficient basis to question the lawfulness" of the contributions under 11 CFR 103.3(b). The Commission concluded that, because the committee could not, under the circumstances, determine the identity of the original contributor, the funds should be disbursed at that time for a lawful purpose unrelated to any Federal campaign, committee, or candidate; to the Federal government, a state or local governmental entity, or a charitable organization qualified under 26 U.S.C. 170(c).

The Commission notes the logical and appropriate application of standards set out in 11 CFR 103.3(b)(1) to situations arising under 11 CFR 103.3(b)(2) where the issue of illegality arises sometime after the receipt of a contribution. Such a situation calls for the taking of ameliorative action where there is a sufficient basis to question the lawfulness of a contribution. In this regard, the Commission does not need to consider whether, by itself, a newspaper article containing general allegations as to contributions in the name of another would provide a sufficient basis to question the lawfulness of a contribution. However, you note the "specificity" of the allegations presented to you in meetings with the reporter. In addition, the May 3 article contains specific information briefly described above as to some of the contributions. The Commission concludes that these circumstances present a sufficient basis for you to question the

legality of at least some of the contributions at issue. You must, therefore, take steps that would constitute best efforts to determine the legality of those contributions.

Based on information you may have received from the reporter, there may be some contributions (from the Maryland contributors) that may not present a genuine question of legality to you at this time. Nevertheless, the Commission advises exercising best efforts at determining the legality of those contributions as well. In instances where the Commission has investigated and determined that there is culpability on the part of the recipient committee, the Commission often views the expeditious refund or disgorgement of unlawful contributions as a mitigating factor in determining an appropriate civil penalty.

Either one of your proposed courses of action would comply with the best efforts requirements set out in 11 CFR 103.3(b)(1).<sup>1/</sup> The amounts of those contributions for which the identified donors do not provide confirmation of legality should be disbursed for any of the lawful purposes listed in Advisory Opinion 1991-39, and not for a purpose related to any of the Fund's activities. Disbursements should be made in this way because the individual alleged to have reimbursed the contributors denies having done so. See Advisory Opinion 1991-39. The disbursements should be made, from committee funds on hand, within thirty days of this opinion. If the Fund does not have sufficient monies on hand to make the disbursements, it should make the disbursements from the next funds it receives. 11 CFR 103.3(b)(2).

The Fund may have credible information as to a specific contribution indicating that it was made in the name of another, notwithstanding any explanation and assertion of legality by the contributor that might be offered if the committee had made inquiry. In this situation, the Fund should disgorge the contribution amount as described above within thirty days of your receipt of this opinion, or from the next funds it receives.<sup>2/</sup>

This response constitutes an advisory opinion concerning application of the Act, or regulations prescribed by the Commission, to the specific transaction or activity set forth in your request. See 2 U.S.C. 437f.

Sincerely,

(signed)

Danny L. McDonald  
Chairman

Enclosures (AOs 1991-39, 1989-5, and 1984-52)

1 The Commission assumes that, in connection with your second proposal, i.e., the written memorialization of contributions with the Maryland contributors, the Fund will describe to the contributors the proper criteria for contributions, as provided for in the first proposal.

2 The Commission notes that the United States Attorney for the Northern District of Maryland has submitted comments with respect to your request. This advisory opinion does not require you to contact any contributors contrary to the express advice of the U.S. Attorney. However, if upon

the request of the U.S. Attorney, you decide not to contact contributors, you may not use the amounts of their questionable contributions for any committee expenses, and such amounts must be disgorged as described above. If the Fund does not have sufficient monies on hand, it must make the disgorgement from the next funds it receives.