

## Senator Bob Menendez's Corruption Trial Begins



**Summary:** *The trial into New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez's questionable actions to help a friend began with both sides arguing over what constitutes corruption and helping out a friend.*

U.S. Senator Bob Menendez has been accused of using his power to provide services for a wealthy friend, in exchange for fancy trips and donations to his campaign. Federal prosecutors told the jury that he abused his authority in a years-long bribery scheme.

The New Jersey Democrat claims the services for a wealthy ophthalmologist were done as a friend, not because of bribes. His lawyer Abbe Lowell said, "Acting out of friendship is not improper, it is not corrupt, and it is certainly not a crime." He claims Menendez's friendship with Salomon Melgen was more like a brother relationship.

Lead prosecutor Peter Koski disagrees. He stated, "This case is about a corrupt politician who sold his Senate office for a life of luxury he couldn't afford." They accused the New Jersey senator of intervening with federal officials in order to help Melgen's foreign girlfriends get visas, help Melgen in a Medicare fraud case, and prevent the border patrol from donating screening equipment to a port in the Dominican Republic where Melgen had his own screening company. In return for his help, Menendez was awarded private jet flights, stays at a Caribbean villa, stays at a lavish Paris hotel, and more.

Koski explained to jurors that Menendez pressured the U.S. State Department to take care of dispute between a company Melgen owned and the Dominican Republic. He also told how Melgen was involved in a Medicare overbilling scheme and Menendez interfered to ask officials to change the reimbursement policy in favor of Melgen. Medicare claimed Melgen overbilled them by \$8.9 million. He was convicted earlier this year of that fraud.

A key part of the corruption is the timing of gifts and money that Menendez received from Melgen. Koski pointed out the timing of many of the gifts to be within a week or days of when Menendez contacted officials to vouch for Melgen or his interests. One instance in April 2012, Menendez received an \$80,000 payment on the same day he met with an assistant secretary of state to discuss the Dominican Republic contract dispute. As Koski stated, "Robert Menendez was Salomon Melgen's personal United States senator."

Lowell says Menendez intervened only after researching the issues and concluding it was worth the effort. Quite often when he contacted other government officials, they urged Menendez to let the matters run their course. For the tourist visa of one of Melgen's girlfriends, she and her sister were denied because "neither is working. No solvency of their own. Not fully convinced of motives for travel." Menendez went back to the embassy, pushing them to approve her application. After a second interview, her visa was approved. This instance caught the attention of Menendez's staffers. One wrote in a private email to another staffer, "In my view, this is ONLY DUE to the fact that rm INTERVENED."

If Menendez is convicted, resigns, or gets expelled by his colleagues before January, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie will get to name his replacement. Menendez asserts his innocence. He said he had "never backed away from a fight." He still plans to run for his third term. This trial is expected to last eight weeks.

Do you think senators should be able to intervene in government matters even on behalf of their friends? Tell us what you think in the comments below.

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