

Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas Breaks Silence on Gift Scandal - Claims He Followed Disclosure Rules



Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas has found himself embroiled in controversy following allegations that he failed to report vacations paid for by a Republican donor, Harlan Crow. The allegations were made by ProPublica, which reported that Thomas and his wife accepted vacations and flights for years from Crow, a wealthy real estate developer and Republican donor. The vacations, which took place over two decades, were valued in the hundreds of thousands of dollars and included travel through Indonesia aboard Crow's 162-foot yacht, summer vacations at his luxurious New York resort, and flights on his private plane.

Thomas had defended himself against the allegations, claiming that he sought guidance early in his tenure as a Supreme Court justice and was advised that personal hospitality from close friends, who did not have business before the Court, was not reportable. In a statement released on Friday, Thomas said he had followed that advice throughout his tenure as a justice. He also pointed out that recent changes to the gift-reporting guidelines issued by the Judicial Conference have clarified that a broader array of trips should be reported going forward and that he intends to follow this guidance.

However, Thomas's comments did little to mollify his critics. Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island alluded to a painting depicting Thomas smoking a cigar alongside Crow and prominent lawyers, including Leonard Leo, the longtime Federalist Society official who helped engineer the conservative takeover of the High Court. Whitehouse tweeted, "If you're smoking cigars with Leonard Leo and other right-wing fixers, you should know they don't just have business before the Court — their business IS the Court." Whitehouse and Representative Hank Johnson of Georgia led a group of 22 lawmakers who sent a letter to Chief Justice John Roberts for an investigation into Thomas's travel. All are Democrats except for Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, an independent who caucuses with that party.

The watchdog group Accountable.US has also weighed in, saying that Crow's role as a member of the board of the American Enterprise Institute proves he was not disinterested in the Supreme Court. The group's president, Kyle Herrig, said, "First Justice Thomas hid decades of lavish gifts and travel funded by Harlan Crow, but now he's outright lying when he says this major conservative donor had no interest in the work of the Supreme Court. The truth is clear: this is a remarkable story of corruption at the highest levels, and those involved must be held accountable."

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The controversy surrounding Thomas's travel has reignited calls for a code of conduct binding Supreme Court justices. Such a code would impose ethical standards and reporting requirements on the justices and help ensure that wealthy donors or other outside interests do not unduly influence them. Some have also called for an investigation into Thomas's travel, arguing that it is essential to ensure that he did not receive any gifts or other benefits that would compromise his impartiality as a Supreme Court justice.

Any code of conduct does not bind Supreme Court justices, and they are only required to report gifts and other financial information in their annual financial disclosure reports. However, these reports are often incomplete and do not provide a complete picture of the justices' financial dealings. As such, many have called for a more robust reporting requirement and a code of conduct that would help ensure that outside interests do not influence the justices.

The controversy surrounding Justice Thomas's travel highlights the need for greater transparency and accountability among Supreme Court justices. While Thomas has defended himself against the allegations, many remain concerned about the potential for wealthy donors to influence the Supreme Court unduly. As such, calls for a code of conduct and other reforms will likely continue to grow in the coming months and years.