

## The “public service” path to big bucks

By Jim Nowlan

I have never cared for Washington, D.C. It is all about who you know rather than what you know. And about money. Since members of Congress and their staffers know key people in the political game, they are prized as lobbyists, where they make big bucks.

In recent years, the game has become incestuous and debilitating. It may be too late to save our political capital short of “blowing it up” (figuratively speaking).

According to Mark Leibovich in his new book about Washington (“This Town”), in 1974 3 percent of former congressmen became lobbyists. Recently, fully half of the senators and 42 percent of House members remained in D.C. and became lobbyists upon exiting their public service roles.

Many even left Congress voluntarily to become lobbyists, unable to wait to cash in.

The key algorithm is that access to powerful people (which former congressmen have through their relationships) leads to influence, which is the first cousin of power, which is the combination of influence and money.

The prize winner is probably former House member Billy Tauzin of Louisiana who made \$19 million between 2006 and 2010 as a lobbyist for the pharmaceutical industry. The going rate for former congressmen as lobbyists is from \$300,000 to \$1 million a year, many much more.

For example, former Illinois Democratic House member Bill Lipinski sat for many years in a safe seat and served on the transportation committee. He retired voluntarily and went to work for transportation interests and earned at least \$700,000 a year, based on 2009 and 2010

records. This being an Illinois illustration, Bill's son Dan came back from Tennessee took his father's seat in the House.

For GOP House minority leader Robert Michel and U.S senator Alan Dixon are among more than a dozen former Illinois congressmen who lobby.

About 350 former congressmen and many hundreds more of their staffers are among the 18,000 lobbyists registered in D.C.

Everybody in the game wins (except maybe the public). Members of Congress are showered with campaign money from lobbies represented by their former members.

The ability of a young member of Congress to raise money is a key measure in D.C. of how effective the member will be in the game. Thus a member thinks long and hard about voting against an interest that is contributing or can provide important campaign cash.

In a micro sense, lobbying is not evil. Our Constitution protects the right to petition our government. Yet in a macro sense, the growth of the insider's game has the effect of creating a muscle-bound, sclerotic political system, at least according to the late, brilliant political economist Mancur Olson in his book, "The Rise and Decline of Nations."

Olson's thesis is that as democracies mature, they give rise to more and more relatively small yet influential interest groups, each of which has significant influence over Congress through its campaign cash and lobbyists.

Each interest group tends to want *more* of the *same*. That is, the interests have generally reached a satisfactory accommodation with Congress and thus work hard to protect the status quo. Yet they want more of what they have been getting.

The farm lobby, comprised of many specialized commodities and other organizations, is willing to give up direct payment subsidies, which have become an embarrassment. But in

return, the ag interests are lobbying for taxpayer-subsidized, risk-free crop insurance that could cost even more than the direct subsidies. *More of the same.*

The scores, probably hundreds, of retired generals and high-ranking military officers who go to work for the contractors from whom they bought materiel is another illustration of the cozy relationships in D.C.

At present, congressmen are required to observe a one year “cooling off period” before they can begin lobbying their former colleagues, but even during that period they can “supervise” others who do the direct lobbying.

Public Citizen, a watchdog group, recommends that the cooling off period be extended to two years—I would say five—and that the supervision of other lobbyists be prohibited. The group would also revoke the special privileges that former members are afforded to the House and Senate floor and to members-only gymnasiums and restaurants.

But don't expect Congress to give up these benefits earned at taxpayer expense.

In a recent column, I said I favored the collaborative style of the late senator Everett Dirksen over the “blow the place up” style of the present Tea Party.

I am now wondering if the only way to change Washington will be some version of blowing the place up.