

## “Big bucks” lobbying hurts American political system

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.

It also increases the influence of a lobbyist if, because of the wealth of his employer, he can make big campaign contributions to the elected official.

According to Mark Leibovich in his new book about Washington (“This Town”), in 1974 3 percent of former congressmen became lobbyists. In 2010, fully half the senators and 42 percent of House members remained in D.C. and became lobbyists upon exiting their elected public service roles.

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

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, yet many are paid much more. As elected representatives, members of the U.S. House and Senate earn \$174,000 per year.

A typical example from my home state is former Illinois Democratic U.S. House member Bill Lipinski, who sat for many years in a safe seat and served on the transportation committee. He retired voluntarily and went to work for transportation interest groups and earned at least \$700,000 a year, based on 2009 and 2010 public records.

And this being Illinois, Lipinski anointed his son Dan, who was teaching in Tennessee at the time, to become his successor in Congress, where he sits on the same transportation committee.

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 former members of Congress, and the members tend to vote the way their former colleagues wish.

The ability of a young member of Congress to raise money for his re-election is a key measure in D.C. of how effective the member will be in the political game. Thus a member thinks long and hard about voting against a lobbyist and his interest group, which are contributing, or can in the future contribute, important campaign cash.

In a micro sense, lobbying is not evil. The U.S. Constitution protects “the right to petition” the government. Yet in a macro sense, the growth of the lobbyist game has created 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 over the years, and thus work hard to protect the status quo. Yet they want more of what they have been getting.

For example, the farm lobby, comprised of many specialized commodities groups, is willing to give up direct payment subsidies. These direct payments of money have become an embarrassment, because they provide successful, big farmers with money they don't need.

But in return for giving up direct payments, the agricultural interests are lobbying for taxpayer-subsidized, risk-free crop insurance that could cost even more than the direct subsidies. *More of the same.*

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, for example, access to the House and Senate floor and to members-only gymnasiums and restaurants.

But don't expect Congress to give up these prized benefits, which affect their future income as lobbyists.

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.