

Like Termites, They're Everywhere: Lobbyists

by Polly Mann

They are not elected officials—not responsible to anybody except the organization or corporation that hire them—and they affect public policy, sometimes even writing laws. But they didn't all always have the reputation that they have today. As early as the seventeenth century, the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers as they are often called, engaged in seeking to influence British legislators by personal visits. This began in 1659 when 165 of their members went to Westminster Hall and sent into the House of Commons a paper offering to lie “body for body” in jail in place of their imprisoned and suffering fellow Quakers, when religious persecution was the law of the land. The term “lobbying” came later from approaches, not always inspired by the kind of human empathy the Quakers practiced. It referred to all special interest groups that attempted to influence British Members of Parliament in the actual building lobbies of the House of Commons between 1869 and 1877. From the 1880s to the 1920s reformers frequently attacked lobbyists as corrupting politics.

In the United States, prior to the 1980s, U.S. lawmakers rarely became lobbyists as the work was not generally considered respectable. With increases in salaries, greater demand, turnovers in Congress and a change in attitude, former elected officials began to work as lobbyists; their progression from Congress to corporate lackey became known as the “revolving door.”

Since 1995 there have been many failed attempts to limit the work and influence of lobbyists. In July 2005, the watchdog group, Public Citizen, revealed that since 1998 43% of the 198 members of Congress who did not seek reelection became lobbyists. In 2006 the Senate passed a bill that barred lobbyists from buying gifts and meals for legislators, but did not restrict the firms and organizations that hired them from doing so. It also required lobbyists to file more frequent and detailed reports on their activities. Critics assailed the bill as being too weak. Legislation was later passed with other restrictions on lobbying. In January 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama signed two executive orders and three presidential memoranda to help ensure his administration would be more open and accountable.

Today there are 11,195 corporate lobbyists in Washington; among them are 300 ex-Congresspeople. The employers of these unelected policy-makers, the corporations, spent nearly three billion dollars last year for their services. Corporations spend \$240 million a month to maintain this occupying force.

To further strengthen this Fifth Column in January 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court in the case, Citizen United versus the Federal Election Committee, decreed that corporations could spend unlimited sums to elect or defeat candidates. The

Minnesota legislature tried to mitigate the effects of this decision by requiring disclosure of donors. That is how the nation learned that Target Corporation and Best Buy had contributed to Minnesota Forward, a Chamber of Commerce-affiliated group that backs candidates. But, according to the Minnesota Independent, other corporations and trade associations have also contributed to Minnesota Forward—in fact, they have contributed more than \$900,000 this year. (August 12, 2010 minnesotaindependent.com). The groups Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life, the Taxpayers League of Minnesota and Coastal Travel Enterprises are seeking to overturn the Minnesota campaign disclosure law, employing an attorney who successfully litigated the U.S. Supreme Court case, favoring corporations (July 17, 2010, minnesotaindependent.com). But in the meantime, without disclosure required on a federal level, a corporation does not have to reveal who they support and in what amount. Thus, office-holders are subject to the desires of corporations who can, using their vast resources and paid lobbyists, defeat them if their votes do not please them.

Using the U.S. Chamber of Commerce as their agent, corporations were able to greatly expand their lobbying. During the past decade, the Chamber lobbying budget totaled \$607 million, three times the amount spent on lobbying by the next-largest interest group, the American Medical Association. At the same time the Chamber proclaims itself the voice of American business in its approach to the small-town business person.

It would appear that the Supreme Court has a predilection for the corporate world as epitomized by Wall Street, which has become, generally, a pariah for the average American. The \$13 trillion “entitlement” granted Wall Street in public bailout funds did not endear them with a public deep in foreclosed mortgages and dwindling jobs. No other interest group tops the finance sector in laying out cash for lobbying and campaign donations. In the last 10 years the industry spent \$4 billion on lobbyists. As a result it was able to fend off regulation, restructuring, and consumer-protection programs. Following are 2009 sums spent on lobbyists by three leading Wall Street firms? Goldman Sachs: \$2,830,000; JPMorgan Chase: \$6,170,000; and Citigroup: \$5,560,000.

Congress is remarkably susceptible to lobbyists. If organizations supporting mothers on welfare or the homeless or immigrants or poor students had the same amount of money to hire lobbyists, there would be a more equitable distribution of the federal budget. Inasmuch as this seems most unlikely, perhaps there could be a huge nation-wide rummage sale the proceeds of which would be used to hire lobbyists for these groups.

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