

Hired Guns

Their weapons now are BlackBerries and cell phones. But connections, savvy, and fundraising clout are still the keys to the influence wielded by the city's **50 top lobbyists.**

By Kim Isaac Eisler

AFTER A LUCRATIVE 12-year run on Capitol Hill, it hasn't been the best of times for Washington lobbyists, especially Republicans.

One of the most prominent lobbyists, Jack Abramoff, now resides in Cumberland, Maryland, a guest of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. His prosecution on charges of giving illegal gifts and meals to lawmakers and defrauding clients cast a pall over a profession that, fairly or not, didn't have the best reputation to begin with.

For Republicans who thought things couldn't get worse, they did. Democrats won both houses of Congress in the 2006 elections, returning some old bulls—among them Barney Frank, Charles Rangel, John Conyers, John Dingell, and Henry Waxman—to power.

Twelve years earlier, new Republican majority leader Tom DeLay instituted the K Street Project, by which loyal friends of the 1994 Republican revolution were to be rewarded. Big business was none too subtly informed that friends and aides of the victors should reap the spoils.

Democratic powers like Thomas Hale Boggs Jr. began talking about retirement. Republican staffers and even members of Congress, eager to cash in, left the Hill and began recruiting clients who could benefit from their contacts and influence.

Abramoff was just one lobbyist who became a hot property. In 1998, when we last picked Washington's 50 top lobbyists, Abramoff

ranked 22nd. Shortly thereafter he was wooed away from one firm by another, whose revenues skyrocketed—and whose partners apparently didn't look closely at how he operated.

The amount of money generated by people claiming to have influence that can affect legislation, appropriations, and agency decisions is big. Laws now require lobbyists to file financial-disclosure forms when they make contact with a legislator. Those forms reveal the minimum that lobbyists can make. Much more money still legally goes unreported—for organizing grassroots lobbying campaigns, advising clients on how they can lobby, making speeches, contacting regulatory agencies, and creating public-relations campaigns.

A MAJOR GROUP of clients is public universities, hospitals, and municipalities, which spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to win appropriations, often in the form of earmarks—language designating that funds go to a specific project or institution—that their elected representatives don't have the time or power to get.

“Congressional staffs are extremely busy, and often there aren't enough staffers to do everything,” says a lobbyist who specializes in representing cities. “Our job is to facilitate communication, package priorities, and make sure that requests for funding meet deadlines and get included in legislation.”

Nine of Washington's top lobbyists at the Willard hotel, where practitioners of the art of influence have been gathering for more than a century. Seated in the front row are Linda Daschle, Howard Vine, Heather Podesta, Stewart Van Scoyoc, and Joel Jankowsky. Behind them are Martin Gold, Tony Podesta, Mike House, and Vin Weber.



Photograph by Gary Landsman

This has created an odd situation on Capitol Hill. Members of the House of Representatives make \$165,200 a year. Former congressmen like Bill Paxon of New York and Bob Livingston of Louisiana make that much representing a single university, hospital, or water district. Livingston's lobby group took in \$16 million last year, much of it from government institutions in Louisiana that he formerly represented.

Two of the biggest lobby firms in Washington, Cassidy & Associates and Van Scoyoc Associates, specialize in earmarks.

"Public institutions are starved for facilities," says Stewart Van Scoyoc, who counts dozens of colleges among his clients. "They can't go to their states because the legislatures claim they have no money, so they come to us."

Depending on the size of the project and the target funding, lobbying fees can range from \$700,000 to \$1,000,000 a year, on the high side. There are no guarantees—lobbyists are not allowed

to work on contingency. If the project is not included in an appropriations bill, there is nothing to do but try, try again the next year, perhaps with a more influential lobbyist.

Earmarks are profitable, but many lobbyists look down their noses at that practice area. Says tax lobbyist John Raffaelli, "We don't play in that world. Our firm is more involved in creating strategies for policies that my clients are advocating."

CRUDELY DISTILLED INTO three words, practitioners say, the lobbying game boils down to "finding, grinding, and minding."

You find a client with a need, and then you have to go into the system and find a way to get what the client wants done. That's the grinding. The minding is making sure that your language or your earmark stays in the bill until it is signed by the President and isn't axed, thanks to a rival lobbyist, at the last minute. The minding, lobbyists say, continues even after your legislation is passed.

In 2006 a mysterious last-minute provision that had the effect of prohibiting online poker made its way into a port-security bill. Martin Gold, the lobbyist responsible for making it happen, is with Covington & Burling, which represents the National Football League. The NFL was not really interested in poker, but many online gambling sites also allow betting on football games. The NFL wants to stamp out gambling on its games. It doesn't like that online gambling sites make money off its product without paying the NFL for the privilege. Online poker got caught in the crossfire when Gold's provision made it much more difficult to transfer cash from American banks to online casinos.

After the new Congress took power in 2007, House Finance Committee chair Barney Frank announced that he would revisit the ban on Internet gaming and hoped to rescind the measure the NFL paid for. That, lobbyists say, is where the minding comes in. Even after a bill is passed and signed, it is subject to reversal. The good lobbyist can't let his or her guard down.

IN THE WAKE of the Abramoff scandal, questions were raised, as they periodically are, about the need for a layer of lobbyists between corporate America or municipal America and the United States Congress. Lobbyists, almost to a person, write Abramoff off as the bad apple in the barrel rather than

acknowledging that the barrel itself might be the problem. A few lobby firms have appointed ethics officers; most say they aren't needed. But even good ones sometimes work in the shadows. As one prominent lobbyist observes, "My greatest success every year is getting something done without having my fingerprints on it."

On the surface, the lobbying industry seems to be highly competitive. *Legal Times* recently listed 50 firms with revenues of more than \$7 million a year. The highest-grossing of the 50, the law firm Akin Gump, reported \$76 million in lobbying fees last year.

Law firms, owned by their partners, are quite competitive. But in recent years private lobby shops, operating outside the strictures of bar-association codes, have proliferated. A little secret of Washington lobbying is that three large international advertising companies own most of the powerful lobby companies. They are Omnicom, based in New York, and two London corporations, WPP and Interpublic Group.

Vin Weber, a former Minnesota congressman now perceived as one of the most influential Republican lobbyists, works for a relatively obscure consulting firm called Clark & Weinstock. But Clark & Weinstock is owned by Omnicom. Omnicom also owns Ketchum, a large PR firm, which owns the Washington Group, whose CEO is former congresswoman Susan Molinari. Omnicom also owns the giant PR firm Fleishman-Hillard as well as the Washington lobby company Porter Novelli.

British-based WPP owns three giant PR companies—Ogilvy, Burson-Marsteller, and Hill & Knowlton. Within that framework, the British now own such powerful lobby firms as Quinn Gillespie & Associates, Timmons & Company, and Wexler & Walker. Interpublic is the owner of one of Washington's biggest lobby shops, Cassidy & Associates.

Wayne Berman, whose homegrown Federalist Group turned into Ogilvy Government Relations, owned by WPP, is typical in claiming that the foreign ownership is no problem: "It gives us a larger canvas and offices all over the world."

I asked another lobbyist how people would feel if a Chinese company rather than a British one owned five of the most influential lobbying firms in America with many former members of Congress on the payroll.

"I never thought of it that way," he replied. "I guess that might be a problem."

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL lobbyists do more than represent their clients' interests. They also raise money from clients for the politicians whose favors they seek. And some of their millions of dollars in fees goes to the wining and dining of legislators, though much of the ostensible graft has been taken out of the system with restrictions on free meals, game tickets, and the like.

With Republican rule at an end for now and Democrats back on top in Congress, there naturally are changes in who's on top in the lobby world. But Republicans are not completely out of luck.

The 51-49 makeup of the Senate is tenuous. As one GOP-oriented lobbyist says, "We are down but not out. The Democrats can't get anything done in the Senate without us."


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After culling the lobby disclosure reports and checking on who has gotten things done, who is likely to get things done in the next few years, and who has the best connections and influence, we present Washington's 50 top lobbyists.

41. Howard Vine, Dickstein Shapiro. A graduate of American University and George Mason law school, Vine began lobbying with the National Association of Manufacturers three decades



ago and eventually was hired by Miami-based Greenberg Traurig to open its Washington office. He left Greenberg Traurig in 2003 because of his discomfort over the lobbying of former partner Jack Abramoff, now in federal prison after pleading guilty to fraud. If every Washington scandal has a hero, Vine is a nominee.

In addition to a full plate of work on behalf of energy companies trying to get research appropriations and tax benefits for more-efficient energy projects, Vine does pro bono work for groups promoting gay marriage and for the proposed National Music Center at DC's old Carnegie Library. 

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