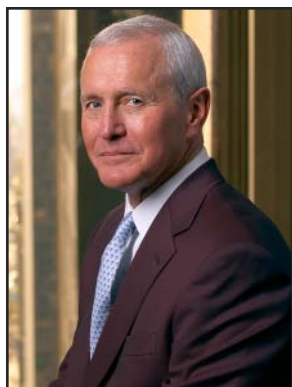


While Candidates Decry Lobbying, Ex-Lawmakers Embrace It

By Jeffrey H. Birnbaum



Peter T. Metzger
Vice Chairman, CTPartners

Democrat Barack Obama says he will severely restrict any former lobbyists in his White House, and Republican Mike Huckabee rejects an attack on his tax-cut proposal merely on the grounds that the criticism was devised by lobbyists.

But Washington is not cowed. On the contrary, lawmakers have been jumping to K Street at a dizzying pace, sometimes even before their terms are up.

The reason: No matter who wins in November, and regardless of the victor's view of "special interests," demand for lobbyists will be huge. Change always increases legislative activity and, therefore, lobbying activity, and government officials do not want to miss the gravy train.

Last week, former senator Trent Lott (R-Miss.) made it official that he is going into the lobbying business with former senator John Breaux (D-La.). Not only is Lott the first senator to resign his seat to become a lobbyist, he is also making the transition a family affair. Lott and Breaux will be joined by their two sons in the Breaux-Lott Leadership Group.

Last week also brought news that one of Congress's experts in capital markets, Rep. Richard H. Baker (R-La.), is in serious talks to head the lobby for hedge funds, those arcane, high-dollar investment pools. If Baker takes the job, as expected, he would resign midterm, as Lott did.

Executive search firms report that lawmakers are more open than ever to becoming lobbyists, so lucrative is the work. "It's a very hot market," said Peter T. Metzger of CTPartners. Lawmakers, he said, "are shedding their reluctance and saying, 'That's what I want to do to make a living.'"

Lobbying is "increasingly accepted, certainly in Washington, as a logical and honorable transition" from lawmaking, agreed Eric Vautour of the search firm Russell Reynolds Associates.

Since 1998, 94 lawmakers, or 37 percent of those who left Congress for the private sector, have gone into lobbying, according to the liberal advocacy group Public Citizen. It expects that percentage to rise after the current Congress.

Lawmakers are not apologetic about the trend. "It's something that I find very interesting," Baker said about the prospect of representing the hedge fund industry. For that task, he added, "I have a particular skill set that's appropriate."

Critics such as the leading presidential candidates consider that use of skills entirely inappropriate. The tendency of lawmakers to become lobbyists, they say, weakens the chance that elected officials will advance the public good and gives voters the impression that Washington is corrupt.

But the pull of lobbying can be too strong for even the most devoted public servants. Lawmakers-turned-lobbyists were once the exception; now it's a surprise if senior congressmen don't retire early to join D.C. firms.

Rep. Jim McCrery (La.), the ranking Republican on the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, shocked many observers recently by announcing that he will retire at year's end. In another era, McCrery, 58, would never have given up such an influential position. Today, he sees nothing unusual about the move and does not hide that he might go into lobbying. The move from lawmaker to lobbyist, he said, is "a natural transition."

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