

Book Report: *The Lobbyists: How Influence Peddlers Get Their Way in Washington*

By Jeffrey H. Birnbaum

Abstract:

Jeffrey H. Birnbaum's *The Lobbyists: How Influence Peddlers Get Their Way in Washington* is a narrative exposé detailing how a small group of lobbyists worked to get their way with politicians over a two-year period. Set in 1989 and 1990, the book takes a hard look at the inner-workings of the lives of Washington lobbyists, laying out their strategies and motives. Although lobbying plays a huge part in our policy-making process, it seems largely ignored in most academic research. As such, *The Lobbyists* is a must-read for anyone interested in gaining a more comprehensive view about the forces that influence America's politicians.

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November 8, 2006

I. Summary

The Lobbyists, a non-fiction work which at times reads like a novel, begins with the history of lobbying. Birnbaum contends that the word "lobbyist" derives from the actions of influence-seekers who stood in lobbies at the House of Commons, waiting to interview lawmakers. The concept goes back as far as 1215 when King John gave English barons the right to protest any violation of their new rights under Magna Carta. This right to "petition the government for a redress of grievances," is still the basis for U.S. lobbying (p. 8). Although lobbying began violently, with armed soldiers confronting the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1783 to demand extra compensation, it quickly turned into a practice centered on bribery.

Samuel Colt, the gun-manufacturer, was perhaps the most famous of the early lobbyists. He paid thousands of dollars, supplied beautiful ladies, and distributed elegant revolvers to congressmen who would support a patent extension that helped Colt gun sales. Colt was just one of many lobbyists who overtly exploited willing politicians during the middle of the 19th century.

Lobbying continued rampantly until it was challenged by Woodrow Wilson in 1912. He successfully ran lobbyists out of town for a few years, but soon they were back again. Almost every president since has made some effort to control lobbying. President Truman summed up his feelings on the issue by saying, "...15 million people in the United States are represented by lobbyists. The other 150 million have only one man who is elected at large to represent them – that is the President of the United States" (p. 17).

Birnbaum says that by the 1990s Washington was home to about 80,000 lobbyists, and we can assume that number has continued to sky-rocket. Offices sprung up on K Street, Washington's "Main Street of lobbying" in D.C.'s downtown (p. 7). Birnbaum implies that almost every organization has a lobbyist in D.C.

Lobbying groups range from the very small (the Post Card Manufacturers Association, with less than 10 members) to the very large (the National Association of Home Builders, with more than 125,000 members) (p. 7).

Birnbaum dispels the notion that lobbyists tend to be affiliated with any political party. Indeed, he asserts that Democrats and Republicans are equally dependent on the campaign contributions and perks they get from lobbyists. The nine lobbyists Birnbaum

follows certainly seem to use any and all political affiliations they can to forward their goals.

Most of the book centers on Birnbaum's findings as he follows these Washington lobbyists for two years to research daily life in the field. He details the highs and lows of the job. The highs generally come when lobbyists gain friendships with the politicians they seek to impress, and when their efforts to influence legislation pay off. The downside is that lobbyists often feel like second-class citizens. Birnbaum states that lobbyists are, "a lower caste that is highly compensated" (p. 6) and that lobbyists prefer to be called "consultants" or "lawyers" to elevate their status and feel better about their work (p. 7).

Birnbaum describes several types of lobbyists. "Guns-for-hire" are lobbyists who sell their services to anyone (p. 20). These are career lobbyists who may represent multiple groups at any given time. There are also focused lobbyists who generally stick with their field of expertise, whether it is railroads, alcohol, or any number of other trade groups.

The other main type of lobbyist is the former political aide. According to Birnbaum most lobbyists, in fact, are former Washington insiders. Aides frequently make the switch to lobbying after spending a few years working on the Hill. There are many reasons why aides make this move. Lobbyists are well-compensated and treated to more luxuries than congressional staffers. In fact, Birnbaum says oftentimes aides are only working on the Hill so that eventually they will attain a lobbying job. Their close contacts and their extensive knowledge about political issues, not to mention their knowledge about the political process, mean that former aides are valuable assets to the

lobbying community. The percentage of aides and lawmakers who turn to lobbyists is continually growing. Birnbaum asserts that it is extremely difficult to decipher what kind of effect this trend has on legislation, but there is no doubt that it makes a difference.

Birnbaum paints a comprehensive picture of lobbying. He makes it clear that not only do lobbyists need politicians, but that politicians also need lobbyists. Birnbaum asserts that lobbyists wear several hats in the world of politics. They often act as unpaid staff to lawmakers who have neither the time nor the resources to research many of the issues that they vote on. They also provide much of the campaign money that politicians use to get elected or re-elected. Many politicians consider lobbyists to be real friends; people they can count on to provide both entertainment and advice. Interestingly, Birnbaum notes that many politicians seem oblivious to the true motives of lobbyists. Said California's Democratic Representative Barbara Boxer of a certain lobbyist, "He's a lovely, wonderful guy. In the whole time I've known him, he's never asked me to vote for anything" (p. 40).

Birnbaum makes reference to numerous methods lobbyists use to get politicians to view their issues favorably. One popular method is to call constituents and ask them to contact their local representatives regarding certain policy proposals that they may feel strongly about. Constituents are also requested to write letters to the editor. But certainly the most exploitive method lobbyists use is to offer politicians free meals, parties, or vacations. These activities are thinly disguised as business meetings, but clearly the real purpose is to win the affections of politicians, and hopefully their support.

Birnbaum details an example of this bribery in 1989 Washington, when he tags along as a group of 142 Democrats and their families are wined and dined at a weekend-

long retreat in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. Families bowled, ice skated and danced. Lawmakers attended a few hours of meetings between massages and engagements at the shooting range. This outing was just one example of numerous incentives that politicians were being treated to during the early part of the time period that the book covers.

A short while later, though, things turned somber for Washington's political elite. Birnbaum states that the years he chronicled, 1989-1990, were two of the most scandal-ridden in political history. In fact, during his research, numerous politicians resigned under clouds of lobby-related scandals.

But in spite of the negative connotations that most people have of lobbyists, Birnbaum portrays most of them as ordinary people as he details their everyday lives. At the end of *The Lobbyists* Birnbaum makes it clear that in spite of the recent indictments, politicians and lobbyists intend to push forward in much the same manner as before.

II. Assessment

With *The Lobbyists*, Birnbaum proves that often the most influential policy makers are not lawmakers at all. Birnbaum paints a startling but compelling picture of Washington's political game in this early 90's classic. The work is thorough and unflinching as it shows that no politician is above taking money from special-interest groups. His appraisal of the lobbying game can be applied to all levels and all parties of government. The current campaign environment makes it clear that no race is too local and no issue is too small to bypass the interest of lobby groups.

Birnbaum appears to paint a fair picture of life as a lobbyist. It seems clear that lobbyists, politicians, and even average citizens partake in a symbiotic relationship of

monies, policies, and special favors. This seems to be a generally accepted theory, as stated by Stella Theodoulou and Chris Kofins in *The Art of the Game*:

Those who support significant interest group participation in policy formulation would argue that in spite of disparities between groups in terms of their resources and their influence, interest group participation enhances the democratic process because it allows for more grass-roots participation in the policy-making process. As such we could argue that policy formulation is a reflection of the mobilization of the more influential interest groups in American society. (p. 137).

It's true that even the smallest business or the most under-represented group might utilize lobbyists in one form or another. Who knew, for instance, that the Bow Tie Manufacturer's Association employed a lobbyist? (p. 7). With his extensive research, Birnbaum clearly portrays how important lobbying is in our political process. It seems that Birnbaum's underlying message reveals that it is imperative for every citizen to realize the extent to which lobbying plays a part in their everyday lives.

No study of public policy would be complete without recognizing the affects that lobbying has on our laws. In *Lobbyists* Birnbaum forces readers to question how well we know the political process. Why is it, for instance, that the richest of the rich receive the greatest tax breaks? Who is paying for all of those commercials that ask us to "Vote No on Prop. 87"? And where did that politician come up with all of that campaign money?

At times, however, even Birnbaum seems naïve to the process. Birnbaum contends that, "Despite their key role in the world of government, lobbyists are almost always the junior players, because, ultimately, they do not make the decisions" (p. 6).

But, while it may be true that lobbyists are not the people casting their votes on the House floor, it is often their wishes that are being granted when policies do or do not get passed. A quick glance at the bipartisan nonprofit website maplight.org shows that most politicians vote in the interests of the lobbying groups that give them the most money. Birnbaum implies that part of the problem is that the elusive nature of lobbying makes it difficult to truly assess its impact, but it seems that recently more efforts are being made to track exactly how special interest money affects our policy makers.

Undoubtedly the most interesting part of analyzing this book was comparing it to the lobbying activity that is going on now. At the time he was writing *Lobbyists*, Birnbaum believed he had seen the most corrupt government in U.S. history. No doubt 2006, with countless politicians being tied to lobbyist Jack Abramoff, makes 1989 look tame. Abramoff is perhaps the greatest example of lobbying. Abramoff recently pled guilty to criminal felonies related to defrauding American Indian tribes and corrupting public officials. While Abramoff's lobbying activities are still being investigated, he stands accused of bilking tens of millions of dollars from Native American tribes. Abramoff donated the money to charities with republican ties, assuring tribal leaders that they would reap the benefits multi-fold. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay was one of the most famous examples of high-ranking politicians indicted because of his association with Abramoff. DeLay took several 'working vacations' with Abramoff that were obviously more about playing golf and drinking cocktails than learning about political issues. Even President Bush was accused of partaking in the scandal when it was found that he had ties to Abramoff. Not surprisingly, Abramoff ended up receiving the minimum sentence for his crime, due in large part to his influential political allies.

The Abramoff case is an extreme example, but it highlights one of the underlying reasons that lobbying has grown so drastically since its inception. The existence of lobbying is a catch 22. Politicians are bound to lobbyists because they depend on them financially and lobbyists are bound to politicians because they want favorable legislation.

With the amount of money it takes to run a political campaign, it is almost a necessity for politicians to take money from special-interest groups. A cap on campaign contributions may only benefit independently wealthy candidates. Even if a certain politician is morally opposed to taking money from such groups, financial constraints might make it impossible to campaign without it.

It seems unlikely that politicians would ever willingly vote to completely give up the luxuries that go along with having a relationship with a lobbyist. However, with more proactive citizens, political watchdog organizations, vigilant media, and altruistic lawmakers, perhaps the U.S. can make real strides in campaign finance reform. Certain non-profit, bi-partisan groups in California are making a concerted effort to educate citizens about how politicians are influenced by campaign contributions. Proposition 89 is the latest effort to regulate campaign finance and help politicians spend more time working on the issues and less time fundraising.

On the other side of the issue are trade groups who feel that they will lose out on political attention without the services of a Washington lobbyist to look out for their interests. Indeed, Birnbaum's account of lobbyists certainly changed my mind about the motives of lobbying groups. Previously I had an unfavorable view of all lobbyists and lobbying groups. I presumed that most lobbyists represented rich oil or tobacco companies, and that their sole purpose was to get politicians to take money from the poor

and give to the rich. Reading *Lobbyists* inspired me to do more research on lobbying groups. I realized that many of the groups that I feel strongly about are represented by lobbyists. And although I am sure that the Aids Action Council or Planned Parenthood are not gathering the same attention as ExxonMobil, I know that they too are making an effort to have their issues heard.

The one truly chilling subject that Birnbaum described was the trend of so many Washington insiders choosing to become lobbyists. The line between public servants and those who aim to influence the public is becoming blurry. However, there is some effort being made to curb this phenomenon. Recently Senator Russ Feingold (D, WI) proposed legislation that would deprive ex-politicians entrance onto the House and Senate floors, and into the House gym. In addition, the Abramoff scandal inspired the Legislative Transparency and Accountability Act of 2006, a bill aimed at reforming lobbying practices by barring lobbyists from buying gifts and meals for legislators.

But the bill falls short in several areas. Politicians would still be allowed to go on free trips as long as they get approval from a commissioned ethics committee. The hard truth seems to be that our politicians enjoy the campaign contributions, the vacations, and the free meals that lobbyists provide for them.

Overall I would attest that *Lobbyists* is a worthwhile read. It's an excellent primer for anyone interested in learning more about our political system. I am planning on continuing my lobbying education by reading Birnbaum's latest book *The Money Men* (2000) about campaign fundraising. The book also inspired me to get better informed about where my politicians get their funds from.

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