

Bills that Sold Public Health for Corporate Profit

Powerful Congressmen become Lackeys of the Medical/Industrial Complex

by Jim Tarbell

Much like wolves in sheep clothing, former Congressmen are using their knowledge to help corporations avoid regulation and pillage the government treasury. It makes Congress look like a publicly-funded apprenticeship program teaching future, high-paid corporate lobbyists how to manipulate our democratic system for the benefit of private industry. Half the Senators and 42% of the House Members who have left Congress since 1998 have taken the knowledge they gained at public expense in how-to-work the legislative system and sold it to private business as lobbyists.

In the past decade, health-care corporations have consistently taken the most advantage of this system to bolster their booming profits. They have spent a billion dollars on lobbying. When the health-insurance industry and groups like the US Chamber of Commerce's lobbying on health issues are added in, the amount spent and the number of lobbyists is even more astronomical. They often have two high-paid lobbyists for each member of Congress.

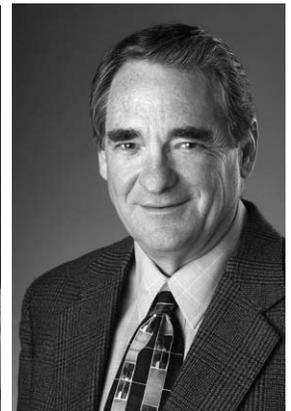
This tale of the two Bills is about Congressmen that switched from the people's side to the corporate side to line their own pockets and assure that their patrons got their way in the halls of Congress.

Willis (Bill) Gradison spent 18 years in Congress, much of it as the ranking Republican on the powerful House Ways and Means Health Subcommittee. In 1993, just after being reelected, he accepted a lucrative offer to head the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA) in order to fight the Clinton administration's plans for reforming health care.

HIAA immediately started an unprecedented \$14 million television disinformation campaign. They created middle-class characters known as Harry and Louise, to turn the American public against Clinton's plans. Bill Gradison also directed an HIAA lobbying campaign that targeted 17 of his old colleagues in Congress who held important positions on congressional committees. Gradison's former congressional colleagues called the insurance industry campaign, "the Willie Horton commercials of the health care campaign . . . extremely disingenuous . . . half truths . . . [intended to] scare people in general about health care reform." Gradison held the White House hostage with the Harry and Louise ads. He refused to turn off his deceitful propaganda machine until the administration bowed to his wishes. Senator Tom Daschle noted that Bill Gradison, a Yale classmate of George Bush Senior, suddenly was not using the integrity he had shown



Willis (Bill) Gradison



Willbert (Billy) Tauzin

in Congress. Instead he was heading an "empty the missile silos approach" for the health insurance industry; dropping the bombs where his congressional career had taught him they would be most effective.

In the end, Clinton's health reform campaign fell victim to the insurance lobby onslaught. In the Fall of 1994 the lame-duck Democratic Congress took health reform off the legislative agenda when they realized that the lobbying efforts of the insurance association had guaranteed that a filibuster in the Senate could not be stopped.

Ten years later, Willbert (Billy) Tauzin, Republican Chair of the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee with authority over health legislation, ushered the Medicare Prescription Drug bill through Congress, which has proved very lucrative for drug corporations. Although he denies it, he may have been simultaneously negotiating to be the head lobbyist of the drug industry. He soon quit Congress and took a two million dollar job as the head of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America. They are one of the largest lobbying organizations in Washington, and the group that Tauzin had just been negotiating with in the basement of the Capitol to create a drug bill that brought huge profits into the drug industry.

High drug-industry profits were guaranteed by a provision in the bill that restricted Medicare from negotiating with the drug companies for lower prices. When the Democratic Congress came into power in 2007, one of their first agenda items was to eliminate this restriction. But the effort died under the weight of lobbyists, often former congressional colleagues, descending on Capitol Hill to do the bidding of the drug industry. As a result consumers pay 35% more for their drugs than people in other Western industrial countries.

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