Book examines how lobbyists influenced politics

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Running for a seventh term in 1982, U.S. Sen. John Stennis of Mississippi faced his first serious opponent, Republican Haley Barbour. To convince voters he wasn't too old to serve, political consultants maintained, Stennis would have to raise $2 million for TV ads. As the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, he could solicit contributions from defense contractors. "Would that be proper?" Stennis asked.

By the end of the decade, the politics of special interests made Stennis' question seem quaint. In "So Damn Much Money," Robert Kaiser, associate editor and senior correspondent for the Washington Post, traces the rise and fall of Cassidy & Associates, once the most profitable lobbying firm in the capital, to show how green became "a blinding color."

With the explosive growth of the federal government, he reminds us, industries, institutions, and individuals have a financial stake in public policy — and fixers, facilitators, and fakers rush in where angels feared to tread.

Kaiser provides the depressing details of the mutually advantageous alliance of lobbyists and politicians, who understand the value of "earmarking" special projects in their districts — and know how to trade votes with colleagues. Enlisting representatives from states that grow cranberries, Cassidy helped Ocean Spray fend off a proposed Food and Drug Administration mandate that labels reveal in large type how much fruit juice was actually in the bottle. He used subcontractors and suppliers in 30 states (and hundreds of congressional districts) to restore a $2.8 billion contract to General Dynamics to build Seawolf attack submarines.

And, of course, lobbyists and their clients now fund grotesquely expensive election campaigns. When political action committees give money, former Sen. Robert Dole has acknowledged, "they expect something in return other than good government."

Kaiser acknowledges that there is "more to lobbying than corruption." Cassidy, his colleagues and his competitors "do not constitute any alien force in our midst." After all, the right to petition the government for redress of grievances "can fairly be described as lobbying." America's worthiest institutions, including hospitals and universities, and organizations opposed to corporate power, environmental degradation and the detention of "enemy combatants" in Guantanamo Bay pay fees to consultants to help them navigate Washington's labyrinth.

Nonetheless, Kaiser does not specify how — or whether — lobbyists might be constrained to play a more constructive role in American politics and public policy. Congress, he indicates, could provide public financing for elections to federal office, ban registered lobbyists from soliciting funds for candidates, and prevent congressmen and senators from lobbying for two years.

But since "rapacious capitalists are as American as apple pie," the skepticism of cynics about reform is "hard-earned." Able to make and spend millions, lobbyists and consultants may well be more influential than elected officials.

Washington is a company town, Robert Straus, the legendary political fixer, agrees, "and the business is lobbying."

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Associate Images:
SO DAMN MUCH MONEY
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