

‘The Select Few’ Are Cashing in: Shocking Corruption at the Washington Post

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Theme: [History](#)

If you want to know what really matters in Washington, don't go to Capitol Hill for one of those hearings, or pay attention to those staged White House "town meetings." They're just for show. What really happens — the serious business of Washington — happens in the shadows, out of sight, off the record. Only occasionally — and usually only because someone high up stumbles — do we get a glimpse of just how pervasive the corruption has become.

Case in point: Katharine Weymouth, the publisher of The Washington Post — one of the most powerful people in DC — invited top officials from the White House, the Cabinet and Congress to her home for an intimate, off-the-record dinner to discuss health care reform with some of her reporters and editors covering the story.

But CEOs and lobbyists from the health care industry were invited, too, provided they forked over \$25,000 a head — or up to a quarter of a million if they want to sponsor a whole series of these cozy get-togethers. And what is the inducement offered? Nothing less, the invitation read, than "an exclusive opportunity to participate in the health-care reform debate among the select few who will get it done."

The invitation reminds the CEO's and lobbyists that they will be buying access to "those powerful few in business and policy making who are forwarding, legislating and reporting on the issues..."

"Spirited? Yes. Confrontational? No." The invitation promises this private, intimate and off-the-record dinner is an extension "of The Washington Post brand of journalistic inquiry into the issues, a unique opportunity for stakeholders to hear and be heard."

Let that sink in. In this case, the "stakeholders" in health care reform do not include the rabble — the folks across the country who actually need quality health care but can't afford it. If any of them showed up at the kitchen door on the night of this little soiree, the bouncer would drop kick them beyond the Beltway.

No, before you can cross the threshold to reach "the select few who will actually get it done," you must first cross the palm of some outstretched hand. The Washington Post dinner was canceled after a copy of the invite was leaked to the web site Politico.com, by a health care lobbyist, of all people. The paper said it was a misunderstanding — the document was a draft that had been mailed out prematurely by its marketing department. There's noblesse oblige for you — blame it on the hired help.

In any case, it was enough to give us a glimpse into how things really work in Washington —

a clear insight into why there is such a great disconnect between democracy and government today, between Washington and the rest of the country.

According to one poll after another, a majority of Americans not only want a public option in health care, they also think that growing inequality is bad for the country, that corporations have too much power over policy, that money in politics is the root of all evil, that working families and poor communities need and deserve public support if the market system fails to generate shared prosperity.

But when the insiders in Washington have finished tearing worthy intentions apart and devouring flesh from bone, none of these reforms happen. “Oh,” they say, “it’s all about compromise. All in the nature of the give-and-take-negotiating of a representative democracy.”

That, people, is bull — the basic nutrient of Washington’s high and mighty.

It’s not about compromise. It’s not about what the public wants. It’s about money — the golden ticket to “the select few who actually get it done.”

When Congress passed the Helping Families Save Their Homes Act, “the select few” made sure it no longer contained the cramdown provision that would have allowed judges to readjust mortgages. The one provision that would have helped homeowners the most was removed in favor of an industry that pours hundreds of millions into political campaigns.

So, too, with a bill designed to protect us from terrorist attacks on chemical plants. With “the select few” dictating marching orders, hundreds of factories are being exempted from measures that would make them spend money to prevent the release of toxic clouds that could kill hundreds of thousands.

Everyone knows the credit ratings agencies were co-conspirators with Wall Street in the shameful wilding that brought on the financial meltdown. But when the Obama administration came up with new reforms to prevent another crisis, the credit ratings agencies were given a pass. They’d been excused by “the select few who actually get it done.”

And by the time an energy bill emerged from the House of Representatives the other day, “the select few who actually get it done” had given away billions of dollars worth of emission permits and offsets. As The New York Times reported, while the legislation worked its way to the House floor, “It grew fat with compromises, carve-outs, concessions and out-and-out gifts,” expanding from 648 pages to 1400 as it spread its largesse among big oil and gas, utility companies and agribusiness.

This week, the public interest groups Common Cause and the Center for Responsive Politics reported that, “According to lobby disclosure reports, 34 energy companies registered in the first quarter of 2009 to lobby Congress around the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009. This group of companies spent a total of \$23.7 million — or \$260,000 a day — lobbying members of Congress in January, February and March.

“Many of these same companies also made large contributions to the members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over the legislation and held a hearing this week on the proposed ‘cap and trade’ system energy companies are

fighting. Data shows oil and gas companies, mining companies and electric utilities combined have given more than \$2 million just to the 19 members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee since 2007, the start of the last full election cycle.”

It’s happening to health care as well. Even the pro-business magazine The Economist says America has the worst system in the developed world, controlled by executives who are not held to account and investors whose primary goal is raising share price and increasing profit — while wasting \$450 billion dollars in redundant administrative costs and leaving nearly 50 million uninsured.

Enter “the select few who actually get it done.” Three out of four of the big health care firms lobbying on Capitol Hill have former members of Congress or government staff members on the payroll — more than 350 of them — and they’re all fighting hard to prevent a public option, at a rate in excess of \$1.4 million a day.

Health care policy has become insider heaven. Even Nancy-Ann DeParle, the White House health reform director, served on the boards of several major health care corporations.

President Obama has pushed hard for a public option but many fear he’s wavering, and just this week his chief of staff Rahm Emanuel — the insider di tutti insiders — indicated that a public plan just might be negotiable, ready for reengineering, no doubt, by “the select few who actually get it done.”

That’s how it works. And it works that way because we let it. The game goes on and the insiders keep dealing themselves winning hands. Nothing will change — nothing — until the money lenders are tossed out of the temple, the ATM’s are wrested from the marble halls, and we tear down the sign they’ve placed on government — the one that reads, “For Sale.”

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