

Ex-Speaker Boehner's Lucrative Return

When House Speaker John Boehner quit, he acted like he was done with Washington's toxicity, but the big dollars of the lobbying world have lured him back through the golden revolving door, writes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

There are a few certainties in this world: fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly, John Boehner's gotta cry. Remember how a year ago – just a year ago – the former speaker of the House wept when Pope Francis addressed a joint session of Congress? And then only a couple of days later announced he was stepping down as speaker?

There were tears then, too. In part, tears of joy, because Boehner no longer would have to deal with the Freedom Caucus, those tea party Republican bully boys who had been making his life miserable, threatening government shutdowns – and Boehner's job – at every turn.

As deeply conservative as he is, Boehner nonetheless realized that even in a grossly dysfunctional Congress at loggerheads with the President, occasionally some modicum of bipartisanship had to come into play or the entire enterprise would go belly up. The Freedom Caucus found such a rational thought revolting.

So, battered but unbowed, he quit, sang "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" when he declared his departure to the press corps and seemed greatly relieved to get out of government. He said he'd be playing more golf, relaxing, hanging out with friends. He's been pictured mowing his lawn in Ohio and driving his RV across what he calls "America's asphalt prairie."

Yes, there he was, John Boehner, the tear-stained, chain-smoking man of leisure, right? You've got to be kidding. A fellow with his connections? He has been cozying up to corporate interests and their lobbyists since the 1990s. Boehner could no more stay away from Washington than a kitty cat could stay away from a dangling strand of yarn. He is back in the DC marketplace, where power and influence are the coin of the realm and he's crying all the way to the bank.

A couple of weeks ago, Reynolds American, the second biggest tobacco company in America – and maker of Boehner's favorite brand, Camels – announced that he was joining its board.

"John Boehner has always loved Big Tobacco," Fortune magazine reported. "In 1995, the former House speaker was caught passing out checks from tobacco lobbyists to his fellow congressmen – something he later said he regretted. And

when Boehner resigned late last year, OpenSecrets data showed he took more money from the tobacco industry than any other lawmaker during his 26 years in Congress. Not to mention Boehner smokes so much that when he left the Capitol, his office was fumigated to get rid of the smell, according to CNN Money. ...

“He will serve on the corporate governance, nominating and sustainability committee, likely helping his colleagues shape how Washington regulates the struggling US tobacco sector, CNN reports. This year alone, Reynolds American ranked second in contributions from tobacco lobbying-related groups, having donated more than \$470,000 to mostly Republican lawmakers, according to OpenSecrets.”

The job likely pays Boehner “north of \$400,000 a year,” Politico reports – that’s almost twice the \$223,500 a year he was making as speaker of the House.

Even Bigger Bucks

Oh, but it gets better. A few days ago, there was a second announcement, this time that Boehner was joining Squire Patton Boggs, one of the crown jewels of Washington’s K Street lobbying nexus, with \$25 million in federal lobbying revenue last year, described by Kate Ackley at the congressional newspaper Roll Call as “a global law firm that traces its roots to one of Washington’s oldest and most prominent lobbying practices.”

She added that the shop “is also the professional home of several former Boehner congressional aides and to former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi and Democratic ex-Sen. John Breaux of Louisiana.”

That makes sense, for as the Center for Responsive Politics’ OpenSecrets reports, Squire Patton Boggs “has long been a K Street revolving door hub, boasting a big concentration of former occupants of congressional office buildings. And it’s no surprise to see that firm or others snatch up newly available former lawmakers, who can command the highest billing rates when clients ask for their help. Of the 75 House members and senators who left the Hill at the end of the 113th Congress, at least 48.8 percent went to work for lobbying firms.”

With their knowledge of how Capitol Hill and the rest of Washington works, their vast lists of contacts and glad-handing expertise, these guys are paid top dollar. Boehner will doubtless make a million or more per year. In exchange, he and his colleagues will be pulling strings for their supper on behalf of Squire Patton Boggs’ impressive A list of clients: Amazon, Airbus, Walton Enterprises, Space X, Mars Inc., Nissan North America, Goldman Sachs, Royal Dutch Shell, AT&T and the People’s Republic of China, among others.

Boehner already will be quite familiar with some of those customers. According to *OpenSecrets*, from 2009-12, AT&T was Boehner's top campaign donor, and *Fortune* reports that among other Squire Patton Boggs accounts, "the *Las Vegas Sands* casino corporation... gave Boehner \$50,600 in 2014 and copper producer *Freeport-McMoRan*... gave the former Ohio lawmaker \$40,800 the same year."

But Squire Patton Boggs and Boehner are quick to point out that he will NOT be a lobbyist. No, sir: Instead, their announcement news release proclaims that he's to be "a strategic advisor to clients in the US and abroad, and will focus on global business development."

This is, in a word, baloney. The worst-kept secret in Washington is the increasing number of lobbyists who call themselves anything but, making an end run around the regulations that require lobbyists to register with the government, as well as around rules Barack Obama put in place restricting the kinds of work lobbyists could do in his administration.

American University historian James Thurber tells *OpenSecrets*, "There is a very easy way to define yourself as a strategic adviser or someone else who, quote, 'doesn't lobby...' and get away with this."

As Catherine Ho at *The Washington Post* recently wrote, "The model of 'unregistered' lobbyists seeking to influence the government is likely here to stay unless the next president and Congress close loopholes that allow the practice to flourish."

Not likely. And so the Washington insiders like Boehner and his crowd have figured out yet another way to play the system – sharpies milking millions from big business, special interests and government while casting aside the needs of the nation.

When John Boehner resigned his speakership, influenced, some said, by the unselfish sacrifice he witnessed during the Pope's visit last year, he is said to have read to the Republican leadership the prayer of St. Francis. That's the one that begins, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."

Instead, former Speaker Boehner has decided to make himself the instrument of plutocrats and special interests. It's enough to make you weep.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*, and a former senior writing fellow at the policy and advocacy group Demos. Follow him on Twitter at @MichaelWinship. [This article originally appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/tracks-john-boehners-tears/>]
