

Lobbying against America : 'Corporate supremacist' lobbyists control Congress, passing corporate friendly laws at your expense.

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By Lou Dobbs, Lou Dobbs Tonight

New York (CNN) - There's no denying both political parties in Congress are now owned lock, stock and barrel by corporate interests. Our nation's elected officials in Washington have formed a partnership with the corporate supremacists and special interest groups in an effort to drive profits to the bottom line of U.S. multinationals at the expense of hard-working Americans.

Congress over the past few months has all-too-willingly approved corporate-friendly – and often corporate-written – transportation and energy bills, as well as so-called bankruptcy reform that further rent the middle class' social safety net. And not surprisingly, there's a serious correlation between the dramatic increase in money spent by special interest groups on lobbying and corporate America 's taking over the deed to Capitol Hill.

Let's be clear about this: Calling these greedy people "lobbyists" simply because they convene in the hallowed lobbies of Washington is akin to calling parasites "bodyists" or viruses "blood-streamers." What they're really doing is selling out American workers and hastening the decline in our nation's standard of living and quality of life.

Corporations, entire industries, and other special interest groups spent a record \$2.14 billion on lobbying members of Congress and 220 other federal agencies last year, according to Political Money Line, a nonpartisan research service that tracks campaign contributions. That figure represents a 7 percent increase over 2003 and an astonishing 34 percent jump from the amount of money spent on lobbying in 2001.

Interestingly, while many major news stories tend to focus on campaign finance reform, twice as much money has been spent on lobbying Congress than on federal elections since 1998. All told, corporations and special interests have spent more than \$12 billion on lobbying efforts over that time, according to the Center for Public Integrity.

Congressmen Rahm Emanuel of Illinois and Marty Meehan of Massachusetts have introduced legislation that would, among other things, strengthen lobbying disclosure requirements, slow the "revolving door" between public service and lobbying, and make it easier for Americans to learn about who is lobbying members of Congress. Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin has introduced a similar version in the Senate.

But Congresssman Emanuel says he thinks the leaders of Congress aren't interested in changing the way it operates, or even the way lobbyists operate. "When the Speaker's gavel comes down, it's intended to open the People's House, and lately it's looking like the Auction House," says Congressman Emanuel, "Whether it's an energy bill that gives more than \$8 billion to the oil and gas interests while oil's at \$64 a barrel, whether it's a corporate tax bill solving a \$5 billion problem with a \$150 billion solution, whether it's a pharmaceutical, prescription drug bill where the industry gave \$132 million and walked away with \$135 billion in additional profits."

The corporate lobby has become more effective recently because it's hiring more experienced players, in effect creating a "revolving door" between Capitol Hill and K Street . In fact, 43 percent of the eligible Congressional members who departed government during that time have become lobbyists, while half of all eligible departing Senators have become lobbyists. Nearly 250 former members of Congress and federal agency chiefs have become lobbyists since 1998, while more than 2,200 former federal employees have registered as federal lobbyists.

The striking rise in money spent on lobbying also increases the chances for abuse. Lobbyists are required to report who pays them and how much they're paid, but nearly 85 percent of the top 250 lobbying firms have failed to file one or more required forms, according to the Center for Public Integrity. The biggest abuses, however, stem from lobbyists' paying for politicians' dinners, trips, golf outings and more. Members of Congress over the past five years have received more than \$18 million to travel the world at the expense of private organizations, Political Money Line reports. Those expenses include 6,242 trips for 628 lawmakers from both political parties.

Alex Knott, Lobby Watch project manager at the Center for Public Integrity, calls this process buying a consensus. "I think where a lot of people find problems is that a special interest...has a greater ability to influence members of Congress and agencies than average American citizens do," he says. "They will send them on these huge golf trips and these expensive dinners, and they will have their ear right before they go and vote because they will catch them in the hallways just before a major vote happens. And this makes it almost impossible for the individual's voice to penetrate the loud buzz that comes from lobbyists."

Americans also want to see changes in Washington : More than four in five Americans believe it would be a "very serious" or "moderately serious" ethical breach if their member of Congress took a trip paid for by a lobbyist, according to a recent USA/Today/CNN/Gallup poll.

Lobbyists aren't the only ones to blame for the current business-first environment in Washington , but they're enabling those corporate interests to cozy up to our nation's elected officials. We must take action to return Congress to the business of the American citizenry, not the business of the corporate supremacists.