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—Alleg H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982

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Today's debate: Tobacco industry's clout

Tobacco-industry largesse keeps Congress in check

Our view:

Leaders back bills that block funds for lawsuit against industry.

For folks who complain endlessly of being picked on, the tobacco industry has made a lot of friends in the right place: Congress.

Thanks to gaping loopholes in the laws that are supposed to block the flow of special-interest money in politics, Big Tobacco has showered more than \$34 million on grateful members of Congress, candidates and campaign committees since 1989.

Philip Morris, for example, is the largest single donor to Republican political campaigns, and it lavishes support on select Democrats, as well. Individual members who toe the tobacco line have been rewarded with as much as \$100,000.

For tobacco, it's an investment that keeps paying dividends.

House leaders bring to the floor today the latest measure designed to protect the industry by blocking a Justice Department lawsuit. The government seeks to get back perhaps hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars spent caring for people with smoking-related illnesses.

The industry is vulnerable: It settled for \$246 billion when the states brought similar suits for their health-care costs.

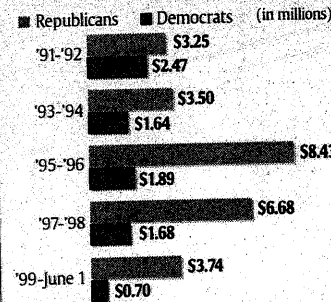
That's where well-placed friends can help. The government can't pursue Big Tobacco without obtaining an estimated \$26 million to cover its legal costs in the coming year. The House voted Monday to cut off one source of funds for the suit. The vote was reversed Tuesday, but congressional leaders back similar language denying tobacco-suit funding in at least three other bills to be acted on soon by the House and Senate.

And how are those positions justified? Members of Congress from tobacco states cry crocodile tears about a supposedly threatened — albeit still intensely profitable — industry. Others complain that they already turned down a request for \$20 million to fund the suit last year, and the administration just refuses to take no for an answer.

But the federal suit only became necessary after the Senate, at Big Tobacco's bidding, torpedoed a broader settlement in 1998 that

Donations roll in

Contributions from tobacco companies and tobacco-related interests to candidates and national-party campaign committees:



Sources: Federal Election Commission; Center for Responsive Politics

By Quin Tian, USA TODAY

would have resolved liability claims and funded aggressive anti-smoking campaigns.

And Congress is persistently unwilling to confront the tobacco industry head-on:

► It ignores the need for health regulation and sales restrictions on the only product that kills 400,000 people every year.

► It blocks the recommendation of the Centers for Disease Control that states be required to spend a modest 20% of their tobacco-suit windfall on smoking prevention.

► It refuses to consider enacting a major boost in the cigarette tax as part of the effort to deter youthful smoking.

Meanwhile, Republicans got \$8.4 million in tobacco contributions for the 1996 campaign and another \$6.4 million for 1998. Democrats' tobacco largesse in the same period was \$1.9 million and \$1.6 million.

Medicaid and health-care programs for veterans and the military continue to spend more than \$30 billion a year on tobacco-related illnesses.

For those who profit from lung cancer, emphysema and other tobacco-related ailments, it's the best Congress money can buy. A few million a year in the right places is warding off potential costs in the billions.

For the country, it's a glaring example of special-interest politics at its worst: the public interest repeatedly subverted by politicians taking care of their generous friends.

Suit is 'abuse of power'

Opposing view:

Administration's pursuit of tobacco industry hurts American people.

By Robin Hayes

This year, the Clinton administration is using a dubious government shell game to reach one of its political goals. Administration officials are actively working to siphon money from veterans' health-care and de-

stop youth smoking. A new and massive lawsuit sponsored by the federal government could push the industry into bankruptcy and wipe out these existing state settlements.

The attorney general herself testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee that the federal government did not have the statutory or other legal authority to base a claim. Members of Congress understand this. That's why the administration was rejected last year when it came to Congress to ask for \$20

I HAVEN'T HAD A CHANCE TO PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN...



Nurses

I believe the assessment given in article, "Where's Florence Nightingale? Study: USA faces nurse shortage" is one-dimensional and didn't even scratch the surface (News, June 14).

I have been a nurse for 15 years. I have seen many nurses come and go. Early on, pay and concerns about occupational hazards played a big role. Now pay is relatively competitive, and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration has ushered in many safeguards for health-care workers.

Professional journals report there are more nurses in America today, but fewer are working. Why this?

As I see it, the awesome responsibility placed on nurses is overshadowed by the lack of respect. Media often portray nurses as dumb and sexy, eager trying to "catch a doctor." I remember someone saying to me, "Too bad couldn't be a doctor." Many people!

Tiger Woods sets new sports, life standard

It could be that Tiger Woods' greatest accomplishment is how well he has handled the talent he was given for the game of golf, and not the talent itself ("Tiger rewrites golf history Cover Story, News, Monday).

Rather than sit on it or waste it, with a poor lifestyle, as too many others have, he has, with discipline and hard work, made the most of it — setting new standards for sports and a wonderful standard for life.

Mel M. Westlake,

Rite is not 'killing'

In a brief story on the convicted actress and animal-rights activist Gitta Bardot, USA TODAY noted practice of killing sheep during celebration that marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan ("Pe News, Friday).

First of all, this "killing" does happen at the end of Ramadan takes place toward the end of the summer period, which marks the