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September 11, 2010

G.O.P. Leader Is Tightly Bound to Lobbyists

By ERIC LIPTON

WASHINGTON — House Democrats were preparing late last year for the first floor vote on the financial regulatory overhaul when Representative John A. Boehner of Ohio and other Republican leaders summoned more than 100 industry lobbyists to Capitol Hill for a private strategy session.

The bill's passage in the House already seemed inevitable. But Mr. Boehner and his deputies told the Wall Street lobbyists and trade association leaders that by teaming up, they could still perhaps block its final passage or at least water it down.

"We need you to get out there and speak up against this," Mr. Boehner said that December afternoon, according to three people familiar with his remarks, while also warning against cutting side deals with Democrats.

That sort of alliance — they won a few skirmishes, though they lost the war on the regulatory bill — is business as usual for Mr. Boehner, the House minority leader and would-be speaker if Republicans win the House in November. He maintains especially tight ties with a circle of lobbyists and former aides representing some of the nation's biggest businesses, including Goldman Sachs, Google, Citigroup, R. J. Reynolds, MillerCoors and UPS.

They have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to his campaigns over the years, provided him rides on their corporate jets, socialized with him at luxury golf resorts and waterfront bashes and are now leading fund-raising efforts for his Boehner for Speaker campaign, which is soliciting checks of up to \$37,800 each, the maximum allowed.

Some of the lobbyists readily acknowledge routinely seeking his office's help — calling the congressman and his aides as often as several times a week — to advance their agenda in Washington. And in many cases, Mr. Boehner has helped them out.

As Democrats increasingly try to cast the Ohio congressman as the face of the Republican Party — President Obama mentioned his name eight times in a speech last week — and as Mr. Boehner becomes more visible, his ties to lobbyists, cultivated since he arrived here in 1991, are coming under attack.

The woman he hopes to replace, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, derided him on Friday as having met "countless times with special-interest lobbyists in an effort to stop tough legislation" that would regulate corporations and protect consumers. And the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, through a spokeswoman, charged that he "epitomizes the smoked-filled, backroom, special-interest deal making that turns off voters about Washington."

Mr. Boehner, who declined to be interviewed for this article, and his lobbyist allies ridicule such criticism as politically motivated by desperate Democrats. His actions, they say, simply reflect the pro-business, antiregulatory philosophy that he has espoused for more than three decades, dating back to when Mr. Boehner, the son of a tavern owner, ran a small plastics company in Ohio. And fielding requests from lobbyists is nothing unusual, he says.

"I get lobbied every day by somebody," he said last month after a speech in Cleveland. "It could be by my wife. It could be the bellman. It goes on all day, everyday, everyplace."

Mr. Boehner — a 60-year-old, perpetually tanned, sharply tailored, chain-smoking golfer — is not as fiery as Newt Gingrich or as unrelenting an arm-twister as Tom DeLay, two of his Republican predecessors in top House posts. It is his reputation as a "Chamber of Commerce" Republican and his fund-raising skills — he has raised \$36 million for Republican causes during this election cycle, more than almost anyone else in his party — that explain, in part, his rise. If elected as his party's leader in the House, Mr. Boehner will certainly lean on his industry allies for help as he builds coalitions necessary to push legislation through Congress, his office acknowledges. His friends say there is nothing wrong with that.

"Does he have a lot of relationships in this city? Yes, absolutely," said Mark Isakowitz, a friend whose Republican firm represents more than three dozen financial, telecommunications, energy and consumer products companies as diverse as Coca-Cola and Zurich Financial Services. "But I think all the good lawmakers do."

Mr. Boehner won some of his first national headlines back in 1996 after he was caught handing out checks from tobacco lobbyists to fellow Republicans on the House floor. Then the fourth-ranking House Republican, Mr. Boehner said he had broken no rules and was simply assisting his lobbyist friends, who were contributing to other Republicans' campaigns. His business-friendly reputation was enhanced through the weekly powwows he organized on Capitol Hill nicknamed the Thursday Group, a gathering of conservative leaders and business lobbyists whom he relied on to help push the party's legislative agenda. The Thursday gathering was disbanded after a Republican power struggle that cost him his leadership position.

But he continued to routinely meet with business leaders, particularly in his role as chairman of the Education and the Workforce Committee, and returned to power as House G.O.P. leader in 2006. Several of the onetime Thursday regulars, along with some newcomers, are among the close-knit group that routinely call on Mr. Boehner's office for client matters, write checks to his campaign and socialize with him.

That tight circle includes Mr. Isakowitz; Bruce Gates, a lobbyist for the cigarette maker Altria; Nicholas E. Calio, a Citigroup lobbyist; and two former aides, Marc Lampkin and Sam Geduldig, both now financial services lobbyists. The tobacco industry is particularly well represented, with both Mr. Gates and John Fish, a lobbyist for R. J. Reynolds, maker of Camel cigarettes, in the group. People affiliated with those companies have contributed at least \$340,000 to Mr. Boehner's political campaigns, with Mr. Gates being the top individual donor among the thousands during Mr. Boehner's political career, according to a tally by the Center for Public Integrity.

While many lawmakers in each party have networks of donors, lobbyists and former aides who now represent corporate interests, Mr. Boehner's ties seem especially deep. His clique even has a nickname on Capitol Hill, Boehner Land. The members of this inner circle said their association with Mr. Boehner translates into open access to him and his staff. "He likes to bring similarly minded people together to try to advance legislation or oppose it," said Drew Maloney, a lobbyist at Ogilvy Government Relations. "That is how you get things done."

One lobbyist in the club — after lauding each staff member in Mr. Boehner's office that he routinely calls to ask for help — ticked off the list of recent issues for which he had won the lawmaker's backing: combating fee increases for the oil industry, fighting a proposed cap on debit card fees, protecting tax breaks for hedge fund executives and opposing a cap on greenhouse gas emissions.

Still, with Mr. Boehner and his party in the minority, they often lost the fights.

But despite the recent string of defeats on the House floor, Mr. Boehner has benefited from his alliance with lobbyists. From 2000 to 2007, Mr. Boehner flew at least 45 times, often with his wife, Debbie, on corporate jets provided by companies including R. J. Reynolds. (As required, Mr. Boehner reimbursed part of the costs.)

In addition, over the last decade, he has taken 41 other trips paid for by corporate sponsors or industry groups, often to popular golf spots. Those trips make him one of the top House beneficiaries of such travel, which has recently been curbed as a result of changes in ethics rules in Washington.

Mr. Boehner continues to travel to popular golf destinations on a corporate-subsidized tab, although now it is paid for through his political action committee, the Freedom Project. In the last 18 months, it has spent at least \$67,000 at the Ritz Carlton Naples in Florida, at least \$20,000 at the Robert Trent Jones Golf Club in Gainesville, Va., and at least \$29,000 at the Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio, federal records show, for fund-raising events.

In June, with the prospects for a Republican takeover of the House rising, Mr. Boehner moved to accelerate his fund-raising effort, starting what he called the Boehner for Speaker campaign. The idea was to use his high profile to draw large donations that would be mostly allocated to help elect other House Republicans.

He turned again to the same group of lobbyists, former aides and friends during a July meeting at the headquarters of the Republican National Committee.

"The wave is there, there is a rebellion in the country, and we have good candidates," Mr. Boehner told his supporters, one of the lobbyists present at the meeting recalled. "But I don't want to miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because we have not raised enough money. They might be able to stop us with a wall of money."

Mr. Calio of Citigroup was among the first to write a large check. So far, a party spokesman said, the campaign has raised nearly \$2 million. Mr. Boehner has helped raise millions more in the last six weeks for Republican House candidates across the country and the party, appearing at more than 40 fund-raisers.

The Boehner for Speaker campaign offers donors who give the maximum amount special perks, like "meetings with Leader Boehner and much more."

But his lobbyist friends and former aides said these incentives did not mean too much, because they already had plenty of access to Mr. Boehner. They just now want to see him as the speaker of the House.

"He knows this is going to be a tough election," said Samuel J. Baptista, a friend, golf partner and lobbyist whose clients include Goldman Sachs and Discover Financial. "But people who underestimate him really do so at their own peril."