

Many senior activists were enraged when the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the largest organization purporting to represent the interests of the elderly in Washington, endorsed the Bush Medicare Drug Benefit bill (Medicare Rx).

But they they shouldn't have been surprised. The AARP Executive Director, William Novelli, wrote the introduction to Newt Gingrich's recently published book, "Saving Lives and Saving Money." He said, "Newt's ideas are influencing how we at AARP are thinking about our national role in health promotion." (Newt, you will remember, said we can't go after medicare directly--it's too popular. Well just let it wither away.)

The AARP makes 60% of its money from insurance and pharmaceutical company interests, like Prudential. Lobbyists for these corporations, in fact, wrote the Medicare Rx bill. It forbids Medicare from negotiating lower prices for its bulk drug purchases, which is why Canada can offer savings on even brand name drugs. The worst feature of the bill, however, is that it will privatize Medicare by making it compete at a disadvantage with private insurance plans, and by forcing Medicare enrollees into a two-tier system. With friends like AARP the nation's aging population doesn't need enemies.

Pharma Phaqs

Merck, the smallest of the big 5 pharmaceutical companies, is still bigger than all U. S auto manufacturers. The industry consistently returns the highest profits of any branch of business. It has six lobbyists for every U.S. Senator. Thirty percent of pharma spending goes for administrative costs, 18% for profit, and 13% for research and development. And it says its high prices are necessary because otherwise it couldn't afford to bring forth new drugs. Actually most of the new drugs that are invented ~are no better than the old ones. Also, significant amounts of research are supported by our tax dollars, by public universities or the National Institute of Health.

A reporter in Columbus, Ohio wrote an article which was sympathetic to the drug company-sponsored bill to ban the reimportation of drugs from Canada and elsewhere. He mentioned in passing a storefront business which was engaged in this practice. He immediately received 600 emails demanding to know where the store was located.

A column by Robert Scheer in the SF Chronicle (12-31-03) brings to light documents released under the freedom of information act at the request of the National Security Archive, "a dogged organization fighting for government transparency.

These documents from the Reagan and GHW Bush administrations depict the close ties between the U.S., Hussein, and U. S. based corporations, including Bechtel. Scheer writes, "the documents make it clear that were the trial of Hussein to be held by an impartial world court, it would prove an embarrassing two-edged sword for the White House. If there were a complete investigation into those who aided and abetted Hussein's crimes against humanity, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and former Secretary of State George Schultz would probably end up as material witnesses." Schultz is presently a Director of Bechtel, itself now heavily involved in lucrative Iraq contracts.

"Ironically," Scheer says, "the U. S. supported Iraq when it possessed weapons of mass destruction and invaded it when it didn't." The documents are available at www.nsarchive.org.

An article in the LA Times about the media and the war (11-19-03) quotes CNN political analyst William Schneider as follows: "We are seeing an anger and vitriol on the left that we haven't seen since the 1960's. G.W. Bush has turned out to be just as polarizing a president as Bill Clinton. Bush is the most right wing president ever, and that has made the left apoplectic. Its contempt for Bush was brought to a head by the war. Preventive war goes against everything people on the left believe. They are energized in a way they have not been since 1972, and they have found a candidate in Howard Dean and a voice in the Nation [magazine]."

The article also paraphrases the editor of the New Republic: "the drift on this issue [the war in Iraq] among all the Democratic presidential candidates, except Sen. Joseph Lieberman--the administration's strongest supporter in that group-- risks making Rep. Dennis Kucinich the party's spokesman on Iraq: 'If we're wrong to be there, as I believe we are, we should get our troops out.'"