

**Washington, DC Speech:
Horace Deets, CEO and Executive Director of AARP**

Length/Format: 15 - 20 minutes followed by Q & A

Location: Sheraton Washington, DC Hotel

Subject: The lobbyist role in the political process.

Theme: Preparation of tomorrow's leaders – Presidential Classroom for Young Americans

Written by: Woody Goulart

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Speech Text:

The word “lobbyist” has a friendly ring to it. From the sound of the word, it could easily seem to have originated in some elegant hotel a century ago. Perhaps you're tempted to think that a “lobbyist” originally meant that person who greets you when you arrive at the front lobby of a grand hotel.

Well, in fact, the concept is over a hundred years old, and I urge you to think of it as a friendly concept. But, it comes from the Medieval Latin word, *lobium*, which means gallery. The word “lobbying” in our language dates back to the late 1800s when it first was used to describe what happened when persons frequented the lobbies of a legislative house to do business with the members.

The word “lobbyist” came into popular usage in the early 1940s to describe a person who tries to influence legislation on behalf of special interest.

I will talk about that “special interest” phrase in just a moment, but, in order to fully understand what a lobbyist is all about, we need to focus on power. Power — or the perception of power — is the mainstay of our democracy. Bertrand Russell observed that “the fundamental concept in social science is power, in the same sense which energy is the fundamental concept of physics.”

If we look at that statement, I think we see, first, that he's right. Power is a fundamental element in all aspects of our society.

But second, we see that exercising power is an awesome responsibility. Because we are a representative democracy, we as individuals elect people to exercise our power — to make decisions that affect each of us.

No one has ever described it better than Abraham Lincoln. It was in his Gettysburg Address, you will recall, that he defined our government as being “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

That's where power lies in Washington, DC, and in all of our society — with the people. It always has, and it always will.

We often hear discussions and commentary — especially on network television news and talk shows — in which there are comparisons of whose got more power than the next person. We hear that power is shifting from the congress to the white house. And we hear about the role of the special interests.

All of this makes for interesting television programming. But when we get down to the heart of the matter, the reality is that power rests with the people of the United States. This is reality.

And despite what some may lead you to believe, that reality has never changed. It cannot change, and let me tell you why that is.

I work for AARP. Maybe you've heard of AARP since your parents or grandparents might be members. And it's our members that make AARP what we are today. We have around 33 million members, which makes AARP the second largest organization in the United States behind the Roman Catholic Church.

AARP is nonprofit, and — more importantly — nonpartisan. We're a membership organization of persons, age 50 and older, dedicated to addressing their needs and interest. Our mission is to enhance the quality of life for all by promoting independence, dignity, and purpose. And we do that through education, advocacy, and community service.

You probably have read or heard AARP described as a “powerful lobbyist for senior citizens,” or the “800-pound gorilla” supposedly ready to pounce upon members of congress who don't see things our way.

In reality, it's not at all like that. But, the unusual thing is that here in Washington, DC, the perception of power is power. In truth, AARP is not an 800-pound gorilla. And we don't pounce on anybody. The other thing is that we don't even have “our way” of seeing things. Our power is in our members.

So, whenever people refer to AARP as a “special interest” group, I think that's incorrect. We have around 33 million members from age 50 to well over 100. They represent the entire political spectrum. Some are wealthy and some are poor. Some are still employed, while many are retired.

We are united by a common desire to improve the quality of life for all Americans as they age. And the reality is — and I think you will find this out for yourself — that as you grow older, the issues that concern our members will become more important to you.

The “special interests” label is incorrect because, for AARP, our special interests are the people. And AARP is not like the National Rifle Association or the Tobacco Institute, or many other associations I could mention, each of which represents genuinely special interests of their constituents.

What sets AARP apart from the true special interest groups is this:

- We do not have a political action committee, or a PAC, as they’re more commonly known.
- We don’t give money, perks, or favors to political candidates or the fundraising organizations, and,
- We don’t focus on single issues. Our goal is to help people as they age. And that means we must address a wide variety of issues, ranging from Social Security and Medicare to housing, transportation, consumer issues, and a variety of others.

What we do is attempt to inform and educate our members about proposals and legislation that may have impact upon their lives. We analyze what it may mean for them, gather opinions and concerns from our members through various methods of research, and then we make their voices heard here in Washington, DC.

For that latter part — making their voices heard — we have professional lobbyists on our staff. But, when our analysis shows that a proposed policy is fair and would be effective, we urge our members to support it.

And when our analysis shows that a proposed policy would place undue burden on older Americans and people as they age, or would not solve the problem, we urge our members to oppose it.

And that portion of the overall AARP lobbying process is done — not by professionals — but by our members.

This is why if you think of AARP as having power, it truly is a power that exists in our members collectively. The perception is widely held, from the White House, to Congress, to governors and state legislatures, that our members are informed, they care, they express their opinions — and they vote.

This power does not reside in the professional lobbyists. No, it resides in the constituents of the elected officials. It’s a local power. It’s all coming from Americans in all 50 states.

And that’s what makes the political process so exciting, and often so dramatic and unpredictable. It’s all “out there” in the people of America.

The power is not really located here inside the Beltway; nor within the few square miles known as the District of Columbia; nor along that stretch of historic real estate from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue up to Capitol Hill.

AARP, as a membership association, cannot shape or craft that power to serve so-called “special interests.” The interests are broad-based and universal — not “special” in the sense of being narrow or self-centered.

And, make no mistake about it: AARP certainly cannot — and does not try to — use the power for ourselves. If we were to start trying to fool our members into supporting measure or political policies that they neither understand nor support, we quickly would lose our credibility and our power by driving away our members.

So, while there is power in the political process of lobbying, it is not power that really rests with those professionals who frequent the lobbies of legislative houses to influence elected officials.

The power is in the citizens, the constituents. In our case, it's the members.

John f. Kennedy said it so eloquently: “the people who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation’s greatness, but the people who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, for they determine whether we use power or power uses us.”

Lobbying efforts are a central part of the American political process. But, the future of our democracy lies not just in creating power, but in making sure that those who have power use it wisely rather than abuse it.

The best thing that you can do is stay informed and speak out to make sure your representatives — whether they are elected officials, or individuals, or organizations you choose to speak on your behalf — are truly representing your interests.

And so I hope you can see that Lincoln’s faith in government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” applies to more than government. The source of power is the people, and therefore, the benefits of power must always be for the people — for you, for me, and for our families.

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