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THE PHARMALOT VIEW

By looking the other way, pharma money helped fuel a toxic political atmosphere in the U.S.

[By looking the other way, pharma money helped fuel toxic political situation \(statnews.com\)](#)

By Ed Silverman Feb. 12, 2021

As the impeachment trial for former President Trump plays out, the pharmaceutical industry can thank itself for playing a role — albeit, a small one — in this unseemly national spectacle.

Why do I say that? Let's connect some dots.

During the previous two election cycles, the industry donated more than \$2.4 million to the Republican Attorneys General Association, which made campaign contributions to the Texas attorney general who filed a [lawsuit](#) challenging results from the presidential election in several states. The association also funded attorneys general from 11 other states who [supported](#) the effort.

For good legal reasons, the suit never stood a chance, yet the attorneys general persisted. But in doing so, they unnecessarily contributed to a toxic climate in which political divisions are worsening across the U.S. and were on troubling display at the Jan. 6 insurrection in Washington, D.C.

Unwittingly or not, the pharmaceutical industry helped underwrite their misguided move.

“Those contributions turned out to have serious consequences, because they helped elect a whole slew of AGs, who fed into this atmosphere that is a real threat to the integrity of our democracy and political process,” said Bruce Freed, who heads the Center for Political Accountability, a nonprofit group that studies corporate donations and compiled

the contribution data from Political MoneyLine. “These companies have not been paying attention and it’s now biting them in the backside.”

In fairness, lawmakers regularly receive contributions from all sorts of industries. It’s also true that companies and their trade groups like to spread the wealth as an insurance policy of sort to ensure legislation and regulations are to their liking, which means that Democrats get lots of money, too (the pharmaceutical industry gave nearly \$2.1 million to the Democratic Attorneys General Association during the same two election cycles). What’s more, it can be hard to know how an elected official may respond to some future issue.

So not surprisingly, these were the explanations I received from companies several months ago [when I asked](#) about a lawsuit filed by some of the same state attorneys general who sought to repeal the Affordable Care Act. This was another wrongheaded effort, because it would have robbed many Americans of health care. And ironically, it would have also cost drug makers extra revenue.

At the time, though, the companies ignored the risk to their reputations, not just their bottom lines.

Now, some drug makers claim to have gotten religion.

At least five companies say they are suspending political contributions. Eli Lilly, Sanofi, and Alkermes, for instance, halted donations to sitting members of Congress who objected to certifying the Electoral College results. Johnson & Johnson paused all contributions. GlaxoSmithKline also halted contributions. Only Glaxo and Alkermes specifically mentioned the Republican Attorneys General Association.

And what of the other 10 drug makers that contributed to the attorneys general who sought to challenge the outcome of the presidential election? I’m still waiting for responses. As for their trade group, the PhRMA sent me a brief and bland remark about the need for “dialogue,” “engagement,” and “common ground.”

This is too little, too late.

Until now, these companies were looking the other way which, essentially, made them enablers.

Of course, it’s entirely possible drug makers hope they can outlast such scrutiny thanks to the goodwill generated by Covid-19 research. For all the complaints about inequitable

access, the industry does deserve credit for the pace at which we now have new vaccines and, to some extent, useful treatments.

Since the pandemic emerged early last year, the percentage of Americans with a favorable view of the pharmaceutical industry has skyrocketed from 32% to 62%, according to the Harris Poll. This is a remarkable turnabout, given that drug makers have regularly been pilloried over pricing.

How long this perception remains is uncertain. Drug prices continue to anger many people and the tribal political atmosphere may take years to repair.

Meanwhile, there is the risk that the pharmaceutical industry will return to business as usual.

“Companies are in a vortex between pressures to change and pressures on profits. They need groups like RAGA to help them from a standpoint regarding profits, but I think they also know deep down it can hurt,” said Elliot Schreiber, a former senior marketing and communications executive at Bayer and DuPont, who has taught corporate reputation management at Drexel University.

“But I do have the fear that when companies don’t really know what to say and feel pressure, the public relations people take over and say, ‘Let’s put out a great statement.’ And this is why I have the suspicion they’re trying to manage the situation rather than truly committing.”

After all, it’s hard to know what, if any, policy reviews drug makers will conduct or for how long contributions will be suspended. Freed notes that donations can be tracked, but that happens after the fact.

In short, this is either a moment of reckoning or another public relations stunt.

Drug makers must pay permanent attention to political spending, and the consequences. It’s no longer good enough to argue that all the political bases have to be covered. In the wake of Jan. 6, this is a cancerous philosophy.

For an industry that talks about finding cures, this is a good time to “heal thyself.”

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