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Longtime lobbyist John Chwat has represented everyone from the alcohol and tobacco industries to horse dentists, military museums and defense contractors.

## Lobbyist with a long view

By Tim Devaney

“Prohibition lobbyist” is probably not the best way to describe John Chwat — seeing as he has his own wine rack at the Capital Grille on Pennsylvania Avenue — but two of his biggest lobbying victories involved putting limits on alcohol sales.

In the late 1990s, Chwat, who runs his own lobbying firm out of Alexandria, Va., pushed for restrictions to prevent underage drinkers from ordering alcohol online.

“We found that underage people were able to order wine, beer and even liquor online using fake IDs and have it shipped to their home,” Chwat, 64, said in a recent interview with The Hill. “We had a big problem with a lot of people not complying with the drinking age.”

Chwat also pushed a measure that prohibits U.S. military bases from ordering alcohol directly from manufacturers, which didn’t just boost sales for

the alcohol wholesalers — or the middlemen — he was representing, but also brought the federal government more tax revenue.

A longtime lobbyist on Capitol Hill, Chwat has represented everyone from the alcohol and tobacco industries to horse dentists, military museums and defense contractors.

The lobby game has changed dramatically in the four decades since Chwat first got into the business. What hasn’t changed is Chwat’s commitment to his clients.

In the case of the alcohol wholesalers, Chwat convinced lawmakers to restrict where military bases could purchase

alcohol that was sold to soldiers at a discount.

The problem, he explained, was that military bases were purchasing from manufacturers much more alcohol than the soldiers consumed. The reserves were being sold to restaurants and other local retailers, which let businesses avoid paying local taxes by purchasing the excess booze from the military.

The practical effect of his work was that his clients, the alcohol wholesalers, swept up the businesses.

Chwat also spent years lobbying for tobacco giant Philip Morris. But his lobbying portfo-

lio goes well beyond representing the “sin tax” industries.

One of his biggest passions is military museums. Chwat has raised as much as \$30 million to help build some half-dozen military museums and foundations, such as the National Infantry Foundation and the Army Historical Foundation.

“I happen to like military history. So for me, it’s a labor of love,” he said.

Chwat sees this as a less controversial and less politically divisive way to talk about defense

reluctant to go to dinner anymore,” Chwat explained.

In the old days, “Capitol Hill was very free, and access was everywhere,” Chwat said. “The method of lobbying was a little different. It was face-to-face. It was very much camaraderie. It was about connections. It was very social.”

These days, he’s lucky to get anyone to even pick up the phone.

“With email, a person could be in their office, and they won’t answer the phone, but

**“Lobbyists are easy targets. That just comes with the territory. But it is sad.”**

Lobbyist John Chwat on how the business has changed

issues. “I’m not talking about big weapons systems,” he said. “I’m talking about history.”

His work has also taken him overseas to the capitals of China, Mongolia, Cambodia and Vietnam, where he taught Vietnamese fishermen about the politics blocking them from entering the U.S. seafood market.

“Congress is still a mystery to a lot of the foreign audiences I have interacted with,” Chwat said.

Chwat took an interest in politics at a young age. Before he was a lobbyist, he was the resident “politics guy” at his high school and the student body president in college.

After graduation, he worked in Congress for a decade before opening his own lobbying firm.

Chwat recalls working on his first presidential campaign for Richard Nixon, who resigned shortly into his second term following the Watergate scandal.

Nixon’s stance on ending the Vietnam War was what swayed his vote. “At the time, he seemed to have the best interest of the United States at heart,” Chwat recalled.

Looking back, Chwat said he has no regrets about working for the man who would eventually become one of the most disgraced presidents in U.S. history.

“In life you don’t regret what you do, you just reflect on it,” Chwat said.

He moved from Capitol Hill to K Street in the early 1980s, where the presidential campaign he worked for had altered the landscape.

Watergate changed everything, Chwat said.

The Nixon scandal led to major lobbying reforms that affect Chwat and his fellow lobbyists to this day.

Since then, lobbying scandals involving Jack Abramoff and others have further “chilled the relationships” between lobbyists and politicians. “They’re

they’ll answer an email,” Chwat lamented. “They’ve become digital.”

This is not only more convenient for many politicians, but it also helps them keep a safe distance from potential controversy, he said.

Chwat believes his profession has been “sensationalized” by the media.

“Lobbyists are easy targets,” he said. “We’ve been tagged, for better or for worse, when we go to parties or meet with people and tell them what we do for a living. That just comes with the territory. But it is sad.”

The lobbying rules are not the only hurdle that’s made Chwat’s job more challenging over the years. The growing tensions between Republicans and Democrats make it much more difficult to get legislation through Congress.

“Congress has become much more ideological, and it’s tough to get legislation through both chambers because of the ideological divisions and politics that have nothing to do with my issues,” Chwat said.

“Many times you might have a good bill, but it would be denied both a hearing and passage because of unrelated political fights,” he added.

Washington wasn’t always so divisive, he said.

“In the earlier era, if you had a good bill and it had merits, chances are you could pass the bill without too much difficulty,” he said.

Over the years, Chwat has retooled himself into a “bipartisan lobbyist” in order to survive on Capitol Hill.

“I work with a lot of Democrats, I work with a lot of Republicans,” he said. “I like both sides of the aisle.”

Yet Chwat’s nose for bipartisanship doesn’t stop him from being an ardent advocate of the Republicans’ Capitol Hill Club, where, he joked, he’s been a member “since the days of Abraham Lincoln.”