



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on December 12, 2021

Lobbyists Make Big Money from Countries Seeking Surplus U.S. Vaccines

The pandemic has been very good business for Washington, D.C.'s lobbying class. Foreign nations are willing to spend big on lobbying to buy access to American-made vaccines.

As [Politico reports](#), in May the government of Kenya contracted the services of K Street firm Rational 360, which counts among its top lobbyists Patrick Dorton, former special assistant to President Bill Clinton, and Joe Lockhart, Clinton's former press secretary.

On May 17, the Biden White House announced that it planned to donate 80 million U.S. vaccine doses to the rest of the world, vowing to continue to distribute "excess supply" of the vaccine to other countries as it became available.



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At the time, the federal government had doubled its goal of distributing 100 million shots and had launched a new goal of giving at least one shot to 70 percent of Americans by the 4th of July.

But in Kenya, less than 2 percent of the population had gotten even a first shot by mid-May. This prompted the country's leaders to employ the assistance of D.C.-based lobbyists.

On Kenya's behalf, Rational 360 connected with Gayle Smith, the State Department's coordinator for global Covid-19 response and health security, along with White House chief of staff Ron Klain, in an effort to discuss shipping surplus second-dose vaccines to Kenya.

In August, the United States donated its first shipment of 880,460 doses of vaccines to Kenya.

Other countries have taken similar action to get a hold of the shot. Politico notes:

The competition for scarce vaccine doses began even before any were approved for use, and intensified in the early months of 2021, when the shots began rolling out. And even though rich countries pledged to donate more than a billion worth of vaccines to low- and middle-income countries, many countries and territories remained antsy. The list of foreign governments that reported using their K Street connections in vaccine procurement efforts thus far this year includes the Republic of Ghana, Kurdistan, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados. But there could be more. A lag in the lobbying filings, disclosed under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, means that only activities up through October or earlier are currently disclosed.

In June, Arent Fox reached out to Melisa Thombley, an attorney for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, on behalf of the Kurdistan Regional Government to ask about "eligibility conditions for



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waiver from HHS/CDC to ship unused COVID-19 vaccines to Kurdistan.”

That same month, Gephardt Group Government Affairs, which is led by former Democrat Congressman Richard Gephardt, got in touch with Michael Schiffer (a professional staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) to discuss sending vaccine donations to Taiwan.

Less than two weeks later, 2.5 million vaccine doses were shipped to the island nation.

“By definition, when organizations or countries are competing for a scarce commodity—it just couldn’t be made fast enough — they’re going to use any resource they have to try to get what they” need, said a lobbyist working to acquire surplus American vaccine doses for a foreign country. “They look around and say who do we know and let’s make sure they know the request.”

Some foreign governments have focused their lobbying efforts on Congress. TheGROUP DC is a lobbying firm whose staff includes Sudafi Henry (Biden’s legislative director when he was vice president) and other former aides to top officials from the Biden administration. The firm received \$600,000 from the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and \$400,000 from Barbados’ economic development agency during the six-month period ending in October for services that included lobbying on vaccines.

Shortly thereafter, theGROUP DC connected with staff for Representative Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.), a close ally of Biden. Among the issues discussed was vaccine distribution to Barbados and the Caribbean region. Clyburn even went on to have a virtual meeting in June with Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley.

TheGROUP DC also held meetings regarding the Caribbean region with Delegate to the U.S House of Representatives Stacey Plaskett (D-Virgin Islands) and Representative Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.).

A number of D.C. lobbying firms have maximized their ability to get vaccines into the hands of foreign countries by taking vaccine manufacturers on as clients.

TheGROUP DC, for example, began representing vaccine-maker Pfizer in September. Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, a major player in D.C. lobbying, simultaneously represents Japan, Pfizer, and Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), which includes AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, and Pfizer as members.



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