

Is the Drug Industry Really Out To Get Gaylord Nelson?

For the past several weeks debates in the U.S. Senate and campaign rhetoric in the state of Wisconsin have been spiced with charges that the drug industry is pouring money into Wisconsin in an effort to defeat Senator Gaylord Nelson in his bid for reelection. The industry, it is said, is out to "get" the Wisconsin Democrat in retaliation for his hard-hitting investigation of the prescription drug manufacturing industry.

Senator Wayne Morse (D-Oregon) first brought the charge to wide public attention when he asserted, in a Senate speech on 24 September, that "The drug industry would rather take this money out of the pockets of the American poor and the sick and the elderly and pour it into an attempt to defeat Senator Nelson than make the obvious reforms which are needed within the industry." Morse called the situation "shocking and scandalous," and judging from the tone of newspaper comment following Morse's charge, so did many newspaper editorial writers.

Then, on 12 October, two other senators expressed outrage in a dialog that covered more than 13 pages of the *Congressional Record*. "When we hear that hundreds of thousands of dollars, or perhaps millions of dollars, are being poured into a state by any particular industry to defeat Gaylord Nelson, it makes my blood boil," said Senator Thomas J. McIntyre (D-N.H.). "There is not enough money to buy Wisconsin," predicted Senator Russell Long (D-La.), who praised Nelson for taking on "the robber barons." Both McIntyre and Long said they, too, had been attacked by the industry because they had called for reforms, and McIntyre asserted that it was the late Senator Estes Kefauver "who first felt the wrath of the drug industry" in retaliation for his pioneering investigations into industry abuses.

There is no question that the drug industry would be delighted to see Senator Nelson out of the way, for the Wisconsin Democrat, in hearings before his Senate subcommittee on monopoly over the past 17 months, has spotlighted a host of alleged abuses on the part of the industry. Building on the foundations left by Kefauver, Nelson has hit hard at what he believes to be exorbitant profit margins, discriminatory pricing policies, misleading promotional efforts, inadequate precautions to assure drug safety, and "immoral" attempts to exact maximum profit by supplying drugs to underdeveloped nations without warning them about possible adverse reactions. In rebuttal, C. Joseph Stetler, president of the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, has accused Nelson of conducting a "vendetta," of rigging the hearings against the industry, of conducting inaccurate pricing surveys, and of otherwise seeking to discredit the drug companies. So it is plausible that the industry would want to "get" Nelson. But hard evidence that the industry is contributing substantially to Nelson's Republican opponent, State Senator Jerris Leonard, is slim indeed.

The most damning evidence—the evidence on which Morse and many editorial writers have built their case—consists of a single quote in the Milwaukee *Sentinel* attributed to Lee Nunn, director of the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee. In the course

of an interview announcing that the Republicans had made Nelson a top target in the 5 November elections, Nunn was quoted as saying: "Doctors and representatives of the drug industry have indicated a great interest in contributing to Nelson's opponent. Doctors, you know, are the largest single group of contributors in the party." Nunn told *Science* he was misquoted, but many observers suspect Nunn did make the quoted remarks, perhaps in a state of wishful thinking.

James G. Wieghart, the *Sentinel* reporter, told *Science* he stands behind the accuracy of his story which, he says, was instigated by Republican Party sources. Wieghart says that, in the course of interviewing Nunn by telephone, he raised the question of whether doctors and the drug industry might be anxious to defeat Nelson, and Nunn thereupon made the remarks attributed to him. Wieghart says he buried the quote far down in his story because it struck him as "just a loose statement."

Other evidence cited by Nelson or his aides include the fact that Stetler, the industry spokesman, has apparently given at least \$100 to the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, hardly a munificent sum and hardly surprising for a man in his position; and the fact that one Wisconsin doctor, Michael Baumbblatt, a Madison obstetrician, has said that, during the month of August, 22 of the 31 drug salesmen who visited him attacked Nelson's investigation "by innuendo or by direct statements." (However, many of these salesmen gave their opinion only after being asked.) Nelson has claimed he hears stories similar to Baumbblatt's "from doctors, pharmacists, newspaper and radio people all over Wisconsin. There are 20,000 drug salesmen in this country, and I can assure you they are working hard."

Both the medical profession and the drug industry express surprise at allegations they are working against Nelson. Paul Weise, secretary of the Professional Association for Civic Education, a vehicle through which Wisconsin doctors make political contributions, said his organization has given \$1000 to each of the senatorial candidates because Wisconsin doctors are split in their opinions of Nelson and his opponent Leonard. Stetler told *Science* the drug industry would "like to see Nelson licked" but has deliberately kept out of the campaign lest Nelson be able to make political capital by charging that "a big powerful industry was after him."

Wisconsin politicians believe Nelson is comfortably ahead of his opponent, but the Republicans are hoping that Richard Nixon and Republican Governor Warren P. Knowles will carry the state by sufficient margins to drag Leonard in on their coattails. Thus it's not surprising that Nelson is on the lookout for popular issues and that, in a state with a strong Populist heritage and a deep-seated suspicion of "special interests," he has chosen to charge that drug interests are trying to buy the election. Under current requirements for reporting political contributions, no one can say with certainty until after the election—and probably not even then—whether the drug industry has channeled contributions to Leonard. But there is little doubt that, in the absence of political maneuvering by the industry, Senator Nelson would have been wise to invent it.—PHILIP M. BOFFEY