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[Back to previous page](#)

Haley Barbour, the fat cats' candidate

By [Dana Milbank](#), Friday, March 25, 8:08 PM

I settled my ample frame into a dark leather booth in the [Caucus Room](#) steakhouse and confronted a pressing question: W.W.H.E?

What Would Haley Eat?

Haley Barbour, the Mississippi governor and prospective Republican presidential candidate, was a founder and owner of this sanctum sanctorum of the Washington powerful. Waiters told me he favored the chopped salad — off menu, natch — and another informant indicated he preferred light liquors.

In his honor, I ordered a steak chopped salad and a bone dry Hendrick's martini, straight up. It wasn't yet 1 p.m., but I had something to celebrate: Barbour's presidential prospects are rising.

The Hotline, a political tip sheet, had just come out with its "[presidential power rankings](#)," and Barbour had jumped three spaces, to No. 3, closing in on Mitt Romney and Tim Pawlenty. For me, and for other Washington insiders all along the K Street corridor, this was good news indeed: Finally, one of our own has a chance to become president.

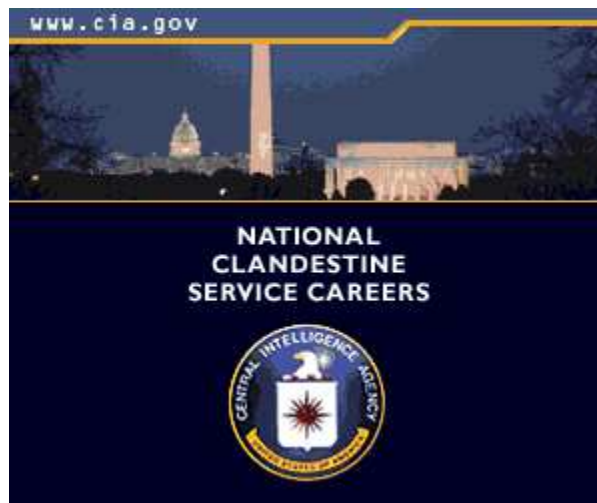
Those of us who live in the District don't have a vote in Congress, but we exert influence the old-fashioned way — by purchasing it. Our thriving industry of lobbyists (who double as fundraisers and donors so that politicians owe them favors) contributes to the Washington area's status as one of the country's wealthiest.

Yet in this city of power players, none had more clout than Barbour. Now he governs a state, [the nation's poorest](#), where per capita income is about \$30,000. Political candidates spend more than triple that in a year dining with donors at the restaurant Barbour built for them. It wouldn't be hard to exceed the median income of a Mississippian in a single night at the Caucus Room, if you booked the private rooms and started pouring the \$650 jeroboams of Axios.

Barbour may be *from* Yazoo City, Miss., but he is *of* Washington. He even uses a teleprompter!

Consider whose [interests he once represented](#). Among his [lobbying clients](#) was LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, which has such brands as Dom Perignon (bottles of which decorate shelves throughout the Caucus Room), Donna Karan and Tag Heuer. When he wasn't helping those worthy causes, he was making sure tobacco companies, defense contractors and mortgage lenders were treated with due respect.

This is what excites us Washington fat cats most about a Barbour administration: His old clients might finally get the positions they deserve. Lockheed Martin could oversee the Pentagon. The surgeon general's office



could be staffed by former Barbour clients Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds. Bristol-Myers Squibb and GlaxoSmithKline could supervise the FDA.

Comcast is a natural for the FCC, and Delta Airlines for the FAA. UnitedHealth Group could run Health and Human Services, Citigroup and the American Financial Services Association could lead Treasury, the American Meat Institute could take over the Agriculture Department, and the American Trucking Association could get the Transportation Department.

The best thing about Barbour is that he doesn't try to disparage us Washington players the way other candidates do. "[I'm a lobbyist, a politician, and a lawyer,](#)" he likes to say. "That's the trifecta."

At the Caucus Room, we're uncomfortable with Barbour's good ol' boy politics: His [defense of the racist Citizens Councils](#) of the South, his reluctance to oppose a [license plate honoring a KKK leader](#), and his [press secretary's jokes](#) about the tsunami in Japan. But we know that, deep down, Barbour judges people not by the color of the skin but by the content of their checkbooks.

Likewise, we are not troubled by Barbour's recent attempt to deny that he [lobbied for Mexico](#) in its effort to get amnesty for illegal immigrants to America. Washington insiders know that's just how the game is played.

The Republican primary electorate hasn't figured out what we fat cats know: Barbour's still one of us. The libertarian [Cato Institute gave him a "C" grade](#) because he increased taxes and spending. He was recently found to have billed taxpayers for the cost of flying him and his entourage on [a luxury jet to Washington](#), where he gave a speech criticizing excess spending.

But within the faux-mahogany walls of the Caucus Room, where a Delmonico will set you back \$49, excess spending is a relative term. From here, it's hard to believe our luck that the Republican primary electorate is so gullible as to select as its nominee the ultimate Washington insider.

Here in our leather booths, his candidacy looks better with every martini.

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