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Think tank jobs a lucrative landing spot

By: TARINI PARTI - December 6th, 2012

Sen. Jim DeMint is jumping ship to think tank life, a sleepy-sounding academic world — but also very lucrative.

Top positions at influential nonprofits such as the Heritage Foundation can come with at least six-figure salaries, and in Heritage's case, seven-figures. Based on most recent reports filed with the Internal Revenue Service, leaders of seven conservative groups drew in average annual salaries of about \$520,000 in 2010.

Heritage's outgoing president, Edwin Feulner, made \$1,025,922 in 2010 and \$989,634 in 2009, according to the foundation's IRS reports.

American Enterprise Institute head Arthur Brooks earned \$606,362 in 2010, the Cato Institute's Ed Crane earned \$488,257, and Fred Smith of the Competitive Enterprise Institute made \$244,886.

Heritage spokesman Jim Weidman said the details for DeMint's compensation had not yet been negotiated, and the South Carolina senator took the offer just based on the "mission of the foundation." "They haven't even sat down and negotiated the details yet," he said.

As nonprofits and think tanks get more involved in lobbying and elections, and the gridlock on Capitol Hill continues, offers for plush jobs for members of Congress and staffers will only increase, said Peter Metzger, vice chairman of CT Partners, a lobbyist and executive headhunter outfit.

"It's going to be a trend if not an avalanche," Metzger said.

Executives for conservative nonprofits who spent millions in the 2012 election also earned top salaries. For example, Club for Growth's Chris Chocoma, a former congressman, earned \$504,413; Americans for Prosperity Foundation's Tim Phillips brought in \$338,882; and Dick Arme, who recently resigned from FreedomWorks, made a total of \$500,000.

Arme also received an \$8 million buyout last month to step down as chairman of the organization after a dispute with the group's president Matt Kibbe, POLITICO previously reported.

Metzger said private corporations are going to start giving more money to nonprofits on both sides so that they can attract top government officials for executive positions.

He said with growing frustration among top leaders in the House and Senate, the thinking seems to be: "Get on the outside."

Craig Holman, a government affairs lobbyist for Public Citizen, a group that pushes for government transparency, also expects DeMint's move to a think tank to become common practice for members of Congress.

"DeMint has a Rolodex that he is basically selling to Heritage," Holman said. "I haven't seen the revolving door abuse happen with nonprofit groups, but I do expect this to become more common as these front groups from the election like Crossroads GPS get more into lobbying activity."

Based on Feulner's salary and DeMint's influence, Holman predicts he could be getting an annual salary close to \$3 million from Heritage.

In 2010, DeMint's net worth was valued between \$16,000 and \$65,000 by the Center for Responsive Politics based on the Senator's personal financial disclosures. He earns an annual salary of \$174,000 for serving in the Senate.

Conservative nonprofits aren't alone in offering high salaries to influential government officials.

John Podesta, president and director for the Center for American Progress in 2010, earned \$274,103. The salary for current president of the center, Neera Tanden, will not be available until more recent IRS reports become available.

In 2010, as chief operating officer, Tanden earned \$173,887 from the center and related organizations. Both Podesta and Tanden previously served in key roles for the Clinton administration. Tanden also served as a senior adviser to President Barack Obama.