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The Lives They Lived

Anne Wexler: Superlobbyist

By [MATT BAI](#)

1930-2009

At the dawn of the 1960s, Anne Wexler was living an idyllic life, in a “Mad Men” sort of way. The daughter of a prominent Manhattan architect, she had graduated from Skidmore, married an ophthalmologist and given birth to two sons. She kept a neat house in Westport and lunched with the ladies. “I had all the Jewish princess stuff” is how she later described it. But the news from places like Montgomery and Saigon kept washing up like a wave on her manicured front lawn. More than anything else, it was the escalation of the war she detested that pulled her into politics, first as the manager of local campaigns and then as a key organizer of Eugene McCarthy’s 1968 crusade. She wasn’t a feminist in the confrontational sense — [Betty Friedan](#) was a friend, never a mentor — but Wexler soon became a role model for younger women who were bent on remaking a male-dominated [Democratic Party](#). Older and more worldly than they were, Wexler seemed instinctively to know how the game was played.

Her co-chairman and patron on the local McCarthy campaign was Joe Duffey, an ordained minister and a former student activist, and when Duffey ran for the Senate two years later, Wexler organized a legion of young volunteers that included Hillary Rodham and [Bill Clinton](#). Duffey lost, but by then he and his protégée had fallen in love; Wexler left her family (Duffey had already separated from his wife), and the political comrades married, eventually raising children together. They worked for [George McGovern](#) in 1972 and for [Jimmy Carter](#) in 1976, and when Carter and his young band of Georgian insurgents found themselves, just a year into the presidency, besieged by the establishment of their own party, the president brought in Wexler to stave off the rebellion. Her job was to keep the interest groups in line, cajoling and co-opting in her low-key, likable way. Carter’s accomplishments weren’t many, but where he succeeded during his term, Anne Wexler was always near.

After Carter’s punishing defeat in 1980, Wexler might have gravitated to one of the liberal causes she championed or perhaps to another quixotic campaign. But Wexler had been on the inside now, and she was inclined to stay there — and to start a potentially lucrative business. The day after Reagan took office, Anne Wexler officially opened her own lobbying shop. Washington was never the same.

Up to that point, the lobbying business was primarily divided by partisan boundaries; Democratic firms had access to Democratic lawmakers and Republicans to Republicans, which meant that a lobbyist's business relied on the fortunes of his party. Putting aside the ideological convictions that transformed her life, Wexler would team up with Nancy Clark Reynolds, a close friend of Reagan's, to create a firm that not only would be led by women — “We're going to be underestimated, and it'll work every time,” Wexler told her new partner — but that could also reach any level of government, no matter who was in charge. As the lobbying business grew into a \$3 billion industry, Wexler's name became synonymous with a new generation of elite “superlobbyists,” lawyers and political operatives whose influence on Capitol Hill made them far wealthier than many of the politicians they manipulated.

Wexler always rejected the idea that she had betrayed the principles of her activist heyday. Rather, she portrayed her lobbying work as an extension of the public-service ideal, even as her firm's client list expanded to include the likes of Anheuser-Busch, [General Motors](#) and Aetna. “Government officials are not comfortable making these complicated decisions by themselves,” Wexler explained to a Time reporter in 1986. It had the hollow ring of rationalization. Wexler sold the company to Hill & Knowlton, the public-relations giant, in 1990 but continued to run it. Ultimately, the woman who once led the fight for Gene McCarthy happily added a new partner's name to the door: Bob Walker, the former Republican congressman and one of [Newt Gingrich](#)'s chief acolytes.

Wexler's death, after a return of cancer she first beat back more than 20 years earlier, was met with tributes from many of the capital's leading liberals — and with scorn from a few. “What might Anne Wexler have accomplished for causes she really believed in,” the writer [Michael Kinsley](#) asked in a column in The Washington Post, “if she hadn't spent the last three decades of her life taking on any cause that walked in the door with a checkbook in hand?” Fair or not, Kinsley's critique neglected the larger context. Wexler's career was, in fact, the story of a generation. The young idealists of both the McGovernite left and the Goldwater right had arrived in Washington vowing to reform it, but by the time Anne Wexler died, they had become, instead, their own kind of establishment — a ruling class of consultants and lobbyists and celebrity pundits every bit as immovable as the machine bosses and Brahmin lawyers of another era. As Wexler herself might have pointed out, she didn't do anything her male contemporaries hadn't done. She was simply better at it.

Matt Bai, a contributing writer, is the author of "The Argument."

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