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[View Related Topics](#)**November 19, 1995, Sunday, Late Edition - Final****SECTION:** Section 1; Page 41; Column 2; Metropolitan Desk; Second Front**LENGTH:** 1636 words**HEADLINE:** **On Tobacco Lobby Lists, Two Unlikely Names;**
Black Congressmen Defend Donations**BYLINE:** By IAN FISHER**DATELINE:** WASHINGTON, Nov. 17**BODY:**

Representative Edolphus Towns, Democrat of Brooklyn, defends the huge contributions he receives from tobacco companies this way: He is from Chadbourn, N.C., the son of sharecroppers who depended on growing tobacco for survival. And besides, tobacco is a legal product.

Representative Charles B. Rangel, Democrat of Harlem and a fighter to overhaul the health care system, pleaded ignorance about taking tobacco money, saying he could not remember being approached by anyone from the industry recently.

"How much money did I get?" he asked in an interview last week. "I can't recall a nickel, if my life depended on it."

Mr. Towns and Mr. Rangel, black politicians who represent largely black districts, might appear to be unlikely candidates to accept the tobacco industry's largess: The death rate from lung disease -- which is mostly caused by smoking -- is nearly 22 percent higher for blacks than for whites, according to the American Lung Association. And black and Hispanic leaders, Mr. Rangel among them, have complained for years that minority neighborhoods are special targets of tobacco and alcohol advertising.

Yet both men are among the House of Representatives' top 20 recipients of tobacco money, in a list dominated by politicians from states where tobacco is grown. From January 1985 through September 1995, the industry gave Mr. Rangel \$49,950 and Mr. Towns \$47,680, according to two anti-smoking groups. That was more than any other New Yorker in the House received, and comparable to the \$53,500 given to House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Georgian who is considered a friend of tobacco interests. On the list of New Yorkers, the representative who comes in third is Thomas J. Manton, Democrat of Queens, who is white, and who accepted \$43,837 over the same period. No one else in the New York delegation came close to that amount.

Mr. Towns and Mr. Rangel reject outright the contention made by some anti-smoking groups that black politicians have a particular responsibility to refuse money from tobacco companies, given the toll that lung disease takes on blacks.

Indeed, in the men's districts, criticism of their tobacco ties has often been gentle and behind the scenes, underscoring the conflicting emotions of a larger, more complex reality about tobacco, race and money: tobacco companies have become enormous supporters of black organizations -- from dance groups to housing programs to the National Urban League -- that outside charities often overlook.

What some consider blood money has become the plasma for others.

"They are putting more and more into supporting the infrastructure, the lifeblood of these communities," said Dr. Norma J. Goodwin, an internist in Brooklyn and founder of Health Watch Information and Promotion Service, which has explored ways for community groups to wean themselves from tobacco money. "To the extent that they have done so, they have almost silenced or paralyzed the leadership who would speak out."

Though Mr. Rangel and Mr. Towns have received a similar amount of money, each has a decidedly different reputation in Congress.

Mr. Towns, elected in 1982 and the former head of the Congressional Black Caucus, has been such an ardent supporter of the tobacco industry's causes that he is known on Capitol Hill as "the Marlboro Man," though he has never smoked.

Mr. Rangel, elected in 1970 and who quit a 35-year smoking habit 15 years ago, has been a favorite of the tobacco interests largely because of his strong opposition to excise taxes on cigarettes, which he argues penalizes poor people more than rich people. But he often votes against the industry on other issues.

"Edolphus Towns has a record of supporting the tobacco industry position on almost every issue that has arisen," said Matthew L. Meyers, counsel to the Coalition on Smoking or Health. "Even more striking, he has often been a vocal supporter of the tobacco industry position despite the impact of the tobacco industry marketing and tobacco consumption in his community."

"Rangel is more complicated," he added. "Excise taxes are more complicated questions, so when you look for motives one can't simply ignore Rangel's asserted motive."

Both men, defensive about the issue, vigorously deny the money has ever affected their votes in Congress or their voices back home. Critics argue that the ties of money are long if not always immediately seen, as cultural groups in New York learned last year when Philip Morris executives who had made gifts to them began calling to urge help in defeating the strict smoking regulations proposed in the City Council. And tobacco company spokesmen said they typically give to politicians who support a portion of their agenda.

While Mr. Towns rarely speaks publicly about the issue, he defended his support of tobacco causes in an interview last week by saying the industry has been a lifelong friend. He said he began working in tobacco fields when he was 10 or 11 and earned money for college picking tobacco, just as he said the crop elevated many other black families in tobacco country.

"Many blacks were able to make it because of the tobacco industry," Mr. Towns said.

Now, he said he would be irresponsible to push off an industry that funnels so much money into organizations in his district. He characterized tobacco as a large industry that pays taxes, provides jobs, gives to charity and should be protected unless there is a plan to help those who would be hurt if the industry withered.

"Smoking and getting cancer, there is no question about it, it's bad," he said. "If that happens, it's bad. Let me tell you something else, though, starvation is bad."

But his critics charge that he is little more than one of the industry's most reliable tools and that the money insures his loyalty: of a list of 17 key floor and committee votes on tobacco since 1987, Mr. Towns, a member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, voted 15 times against the position supported by the Coalition on Smoking or Health.

Several anti-smoking advocates recalled Mr. Towns's posture in hearings in June 1989 on measures to extend the smoking ban on domestic flights of two hours or less. After flight attendants testified about the health problems caused by years of working in smoking sections, Mr. Towns took the microphone:

"Let me say, first of all, for someone who has been flying twenty-some years, smoke hasn't bothered you very much, you look pretty good," he told the flight attendants, according to a transcript of the hearing.

He then raised questions about the ban by recounting a flight he had taken to Atlanta when a fellow passenger started playing a harp.

"Finally after about 15 minutes of that I said to him: 'You know, look, this is no concert. This is a flight and I would appreciate it if you would refrain from making the noise.'

"And, of course, he responded by saying: 'What the hell do you want from me? I am not allowed to smoke, and I have to do something or else I am going to go crazy,' " Mr. Towns said. "Don't you think a lot of incidents will occur if you do not allow people the right to smoke?"

After the industry threw its support behind the two-hour ban, Mr. Towns introduced an amendment to make it

permanent.

Mr. Towns also opposed a bill last year to ban smoking in most public places in the nation, voting against it in a subcommittee of the Energy and Commerce Committee. Congressional finance records show that on the day before the subcommittee vote, May 11, Mr. Towns received \$4,500 from the RJ Reynolds political action committee. Within five days after the vote, he received an additional \$2,000 from other tobacco political action committees.

In the interview, Mr. Towns did not deny receiving the money but said he did not know about it at the time, because the contributions were handled by his New York office. And in general, he said, "If I didn't get a dime from the tobacco industry, my views on this would be the same."

For Rangel, the picture has been more cloudy: In a list of nine key tobacco votes, Mr. Rangel voted in step with the Coalition on Smoking or Health's recommendations five times, and two of his opposing votes concerned excise taxes. Last year, he softened his position somewhat by saying that he could support an increase in the cigarette excise tax, but only as a way to pay for national health care.

"I am violently opposed to excise taxes and the only time that I even thought about changing my mind -- and did -- was connected to the health bill because I know there is a connection between lung cancer and illnesses and smoking," he said.

Many anti-smoking activists say they have detected a shift in Mr. Rangel's attitude in recent years, possibly in reaction, they suggested, to criticism he has received for taking the industry's money. He was a co-sponsor, for example, of the same ban on smoking in public buildings bill that Mr. Towns had opposed.

But Mr. Rangel said he has not changed at all, and has often supported measures the tobacco industry did not like, including the bans on smoking on airplane flights and the addition of warning labels on cigarette packages.

He said, however, that tobacco money had never affected a single vote, and that he had not met with anyone from the tobacco industry in years and did not keep track of how much he received. He dismissed any suggestion of returning it.

"I'm not going to track down contributors and say: 'You make your money selling cigarettes and I'm not going to take your money,' " he said. "Because these people sell everything. I can't separate what money comes from selling tobacco and what comes from selling baby food," referring to companies like RJR Nabisco that have branched out into other products.

"I'm not that strong-willed," Rangel said.

GRAPHIC: Photo: Charles B. Rangel, among other Congressmen, has complained that minority neighborhoods are special targets of tobacco. Yet he is among the House of Representatives' top recipients of tobacco money. On West 126 Street in Harlem, Mr. Rangel's district, a smoker walked past a store yesterday. (Pg. 49) (Chang W. Lee/The New York Times)

Chart listing by dollar amount U. S. Representatives who received money from the Tobacco Industry.

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