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Obama's Biggest Mistake

Last February, Sen. Max Baucus (D-Montana) asked the White House to appoint his girlfriend and former staffer, [Melodee Hanes](#), as Montana's U.S. Attorney.

As chair of the Senate Finance Committee, Baucus has [led the opposition](#) of a handful of moderate Democrats to President Barack Obama's proposal for a public option health care plan. That opposition has forced Obama and progressive Democrats in Congress to make numerous compromises to accommodate a few Senators, including Baucus, who have been tools of the insurance lobby.

How different history might have been had Obama said:

"Max, your girlfriend seems like a highly qualified lawyer and I'd be happy to name her to the U.S. Attorney post. So I'll give her the job if you promise to support a strong public option when your Senate Finance Committee comes up with its health care reform bill. No waffling. No "whatever can get 60 votes." I want your commitment and leadership to support bold legislation that gives consumers a choice of a public health insurance plan and taxes the very rich to pay for it. Have we got a deal?"

If offered that deal, Baucus would have had to choose what's more important -- his devotion to Ms. Hanes (whom he's now shacking up with in D.C.) [or remaining in bed with the medical industrial complex](#), which has contributed \$2.8 million to the Montana Senator, including \$464,850 from health insurance companies. Two of Baucus' former chiefs of staff are now lobbyists for the health industry.

Baucus eventually withdrew Hanes' name and she took another job in the Obama administration as a top official in the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Baucus swears that she got that job "independently" and "on her merit." Perhaps so. But it's too bad that nobody in the White House was willing to barter that plum position in exchange for a pledge from Baucus that he put the health care needs of his Montana constituents over those of his deep-pocket insurance donors.

Didn't Obama, or his chief-of-staff Rahm Emanuel, learn anything from their years in Chicago surrounded by the patronage politics of the Daley machine?

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