

BUSINESS & LOBBYING

A 'very practical problem solver'

By [Jonathan E. Kaplan](#)

Seasoned Washingtonians might view a poster of the movie "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" hanging in the office of lobbyist Robb Watters as a ploy to soften his image; the public holds lobbyists in the same low regard as trial lawyers, car salesmen and reporters.

But Watters, who founded the Madison Group lobbying firm in February, shares the same idealism as the fictional Sen. Jefferson Smith, who challenged the political system by trying to block legislation that would have created a dam on the site where he proposed building a national boys camp. Watters, like Jimmy Stewart's senator, exudes an enthusiasm and idealism whether he's talking about legislative tactics, James Madison or pheasant hunting.

Watters, a ruddy-faced and good-natured 37-year-old, grew up in Richmond, Va. "The Hotline," in 2001, described him as an "international man about town, cigar smoker, Crown Royal drinker and high-tech lobbyist." It left out the pheasant hunting, but otherwise the description fits.

After graduating from college (he attended several but declined to say which), he worked for a healthcare company that lobbied the Virginia Legislature. He still has ties to Virginia politics. During an interview with The Hill, state Del. Rob Bell (R-Va.) phoned Watters about meeting that evening to look at real estate in Charlottesville, Va., and watch the World Series.

In 1994, after four years in Virginia politics, a friend's father asked if he would come to Washington to run the political action committee of the Conservative Republican Party, the honorary



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRYCE BAUER

Robb Watters coming back from hunting this past weekend in Audubon, Iowa.

chairman of which was Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas).

After a brief stint there, Watters lived as an itinerant political operative over the next few years, working on Capitol Hill and beyond the beltway.

In 1995, he joined Rep. Mark Neumann's (R-Wis.) staff, and in 1996 he traveled to Missouri to campaign for Harry Eggleston, who lost by 138 votes to the eventual winner, Rep. Kenny Hulshof, in the GOP congressional primary.

Watters then flew back to Washington to work as a producer for "The McLaughlin Group." He said that he and John McLaughlin, the cantankerous host, managed to get along, especially after McLaughlin bragged about his poll numbers from his Senate bid years ago and Watters replied, "Thirty-eight percent? A mule could get that."

After four months with McLaughlin, he flew to Florida to work for the secretary of state, who had intended to run for lieutenant governor but never did. He returned to Washington to work for Neumann — at a time when the federal government shut down because of the bruising battle over budget cuts between President Clinton and the GOP-controlled Congress — and, then, Rep. Frank Riggs (R-Calif.), who held a chairmanship on a House Education and Labor subcommittee.

During the high-flying dot-com days when the Nasdaq passed 3,000 and the Dow Jones Industrial Index topped 11,000, Watters joined Rudder Finn Global Public Affairs, where he represented several technology companies. He then joined Jefferson Consulting Group, and in 2001 the Manatt, Phelps & Phillips law firm hired him.

Chuck Manatt, the firm's founder, is a major Democratic Party power broker and banker who served as chairman of the Democratic Party and as U.S. ambassador to the Dominican Republic.

"It was like getting an executive MBA degree," Watters said about working for Manatt, whom he considers a mentor. When Manatt called about their plans for the weekend — a hunting trip in Audubon, Iowa — Watters affectionately called him "unc" (they're not related) and later described him as "pater familias."

At Manatt, Watters developed a reputation as one who delivers for his clients and, not surprisingly, wins praise from fellow lobbyists

and Hill staffers.

“He delivers on a level that very few people in town do,” said Katherine Friess, a lobbyist with BKHS & Associates.

David Pratt, a former Senate Democratic aide and the managing director of M-CAM, an intellectual-property-rights firm based in Charlottesville, Va., said, “This city is full of people who are pie-in-the-sky. Robb is a very practical problem solver in terms of having him think of ways of getting things done effectively and communicating that so the client is not sitting there with unrealistic expectations.”

A senior GOP Senate aide said, “One thing about Robb is that with some lobbyists they come to you with a problem, they expect you to do all the work. When I ask Robb for something, he always follows through. He understands that it is his job to make our lives easier where we’re helping him with a project.”

In February, after four years with Manatt, Watters started his own firm, the Madison Group (so named because he is a fan of James Madison and because the idea to start his own firm came to him while riding on his family’s property in Montpelier, Va., which is Madison’s hometown).

“I realized I loved being my own boss,” he said.

Watters brought along a list his A-list clients, including SAS Institute, the largest software company and employer in North Carolina; Intuit, the tax-preparation-software company; M-CAM; and the Education Networks of America, according to Senate lobbying disclosure records.

M-CAM, for example, has hired him to lobby the Senate Finance Committee on tax and procurement issues, said David Martin, the company’s CEO, adding, “He is good at looking at a problem and deciding that it is worth taking on because of its merits ... and at taking on issues perceived to be so esoteric that nobody cares about them, but we’ve been successful in building consensus on those issues that we care about.”

Aside from his lobbying practice, Watters joined the board of trustees of the George Washington University Medical Faculty Association and he’s the chairman of the political action committee for CapNet — an association representing technology companies — for which he plans to raise \$200,000.

After Hurricane Katrina, Watters was part of a group of A-list

lobbyists to organize a benefit at the home of Gloria Dittus, the chief of Dittus Communications.

While he has earned his keep as a lobbyist, the profession enabled him to meet his wife, Blair, a Californian and former aide to Rep. Karen McCarthy (D-Mo.). They met when Watters came to McCarthy's office to lobby her on legislation dealing with spam.

He took her out to dinner three nights in a row, and by the third night she was not sure if he was still lobbying. They were married in 2002 and live with two dogs, one of whom Blair rescued on a recent vacation to Puerto Rico.

Blair joined the Madison Group earlier this year.

The couple's Rolodexes make for interesting crowds at their regular cocktail parties, which have a theme, where their friends run the gamut from the ambassador to Malta and his family to lobbyists to Republican and Democratic Capitol Hill staffers.

"That same loyalty and tenacity that [he brings to his clients] make him a great friend in a town where people have [only] acquaintances," said Beau Phillips, a public-relations manager who met Watters 10 years ago when they applied for the same job on Capitol Hill.