

GOP's Tauzin Becomes Hollywood's New Pal, Landing Role Traditionally Given to Democrats

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WASHINGTON — Hollywood has a new pal here — but this time a Republican is playing the part.

Three years ago, the Clinton administration abandoned traditionally Democratic Hollywood in trade talks, agreeing to let Europe continue restricting the influx of U.S. movies. After years of helping to finance the Democratic Party, Jack Valenti, renowned lobbyist for the Motion Picture Association of America, said the entertainment industry had no choice but also to cozy up to Republicans in Congress.

Now the industry appears to have picked its GOP point man: Rep. W.J. "Billy" Tauzin of Louisiana, the new chairman of the powerful House telecommunications subcommittee. "A wonderful man," Mr. Valenti calls Mr. Tauzin. "He really has a feel for the sensibilities of this town," gushes conservative Hollywood activist David Horowitz.

A charismatic Cajun with a flair for deal-making, Mr. Tauzin has no qualms about being known as a friend to the entertainment industry. "I'm trying to demonstrate, from the right, that Hollywood's true friends are going to be found where I am," he says. And the lawmaker's subcommittee post gives him the ability to play directly to the movie crowd.

Hollywood, where TV, movie and cable interests are marrying up frantically, needs allies to help with brewing fights over a host of big-money legislative issues. At the moment, for instance, Mr. Tauzin's Senate colleagues are pushing a bill that would toughen the industry's TV-ratings standards by requiring that they describe the content of shows — or at least keep violent shows off the air at times when children watch. Hollywood doesn't like the bill and is counting on Rep. Tauzin, who has defended the industry system, to keep the bill from advancing in the House.

Tonight, Mr. Tauzin travels to Peoria, Ill., to stage a televised hearing of his subcommittee, where industry lobbyists will defend their ratings system to 300 local families. "If Americans say to the industry in Peoria, 'We're happy with what you've done,' so be it," he says. Moving the legislation through his subcommittee, he adds, would be "the last resort if the industry refused to be responsive to what Americans wanted."

Opponents of the industry ratings system, including some children's advocacy groups, say it doesn't give parents the right tools to screen out programs containing sex and violence. As for the hearing in Peoria, they complain, it is arranged to the broadcasters' advantage; only Democratic Rep. Edward Markey of Massachusetts will be on hand to present the views of a wide variety of critics. "It would have been better to have someone from a parents'

group like the PTA make a presentation as well," Mr. Markey acknowledges.

The industry regards the ratings issue as a test of Rep. Tauzin's ability to act as its standard-bearer — and a tuneup for future issues in which more money will be at stake, including videotape piracy, copyright issues and the auctioning of licenses to broadcast digital-TV signals, which the industry and Mr. Tauzin oppose.

Hollywood is certainly doing its part. While it still gives the Democrats more unregulated "soft money" than it gives

more in the current cycle.

The Louisiana lawmaker has become a star attraction at Hollywood events. Mr. Horowitz, an author with close ties to many in the movie business, runs the "Wednesday Morning Club" (symbolic, he says, of Hollywood conservatives' awakening on the 1992 morning after Mr. Clinton won the White House), which brings prominent politicians to Tinseltown. In February, over a luncheon of pasta with wood-grilled chicken and sun-dried tomatoes, Mr. Tauzin spoke sympathetically to the group on a variety of important issues, including TV ratings.

He also visited the Regency Club, an institution so exclusive it doesn't publish its phone number. There he shared an intimate dinner with a few movie moguls, including Frank Price, one of the biggest independent film producers in Hollywood, and Edgar Scherick, a producer known for such feature films as "Sleuth" and "Rambling Rose." At the dinner, Mr. Horowitz says, Rep. Tauzin turned on his considerable Cajun Southern charm. "It was a kind of bonding," he adds. "It seemed instinctive on his part."

The Republican lawmaker appeared at a fund-raiser for a new Hollywood PAC, later leaving town with a \$1,000 check and the promise of more to come. "I think we're going to see a lot of him out here," says Shawn Steel, founder of the PAC and treasurer of the California Republican Party. "We're going to give him the maximum [of \$5,000] this cycle, and we're going to be involved in other fund-raising activities for him as well." And while the new Hollywood Public Interest PAC is helping Republicans such as Mr. Tauzin, the Democrats lost one of their staunchest allies, the Hollywood Women's Political Committee, which disbanded a few weeks ago.

Hard-partying Hollywood has a lot in common with the 53-year-old Mr. Tauzin, who has a near-legendary capacity to let his hair down. Each year on his birthday, June 14, he throws his free "Billy Bash," a raucous Cajun-style soiree back home on the bayou. (There's a \$500-per-person Washington version for lobbyists and other supporters.) This is distinct from the "Billy Club" — membership also \$500 — a New Orleans-based clan of the congressman's closest friends and supporters. A father of five by a previous marriage, Mr. Tauzin is now married to a former aide. His daughter Kristie works for the National Association of Broadcasters.

The congressman sees a rich opportunity for Republicans. "I hear all the laments about how the liberals take [Hollywood's] support and then turn on them," he says. "The question is, how long will they continue to support a philosophy that overtaxes and overregulates them, just because they're emotionally attracted to some of the other liberal issues?"



Gary Hallgren

Republicans, the GOP windfall is rising. Hollywood soft-money donations to Republicans rose to \$2.7 million in the 1996 election cycle from \$633,000 in 1992, mostly from studios rather than high-profile actors and directors, who tend to give to Democrats. (The Democratic Party got \$4.4 million in 1996, up from \$1.8 million in 1992.)

Industry and movie-company political action committees are also throwing money at Republicans on key congressional panels, including Rep. Tauzin's. In the 1996 cycle, broadcasting and entertainment PACs gave \$263,938 to Republicans on the House telecommunications subcommittee and \$93,198 to the panel's Democrats, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Mr. Tauzin himself got \$25,999, but that was before he became chairman in January; he is expected to get far