

Is "draining the swamp" a national joke yet? Owing to the virility of the swamp, which commonly describes corporate influence on government bureaucracy and Congress, it may never be laughable.

It was not persuasive that Donald Trump got the crucial votes of working stiff by promising to drain the swamp and lift the heavy hand of Wall Street, pharmaceutical giants and other corporate interests in Washington. But he still makes a limp effort to keep up the charade.

Tweeting from Asia Monday, the president said he was appointing a new secretary of health and human services to crack down on the big pharmaceutical companies that have jacked up drug prices to unconscionable levels. He was appointing Alex M. Azar II, who he said would be "a star for better healthcare and lower drug prices!"

After seeing all the Goldman Sachs honchos take charge of financial regulation in the Trump administration and the lobbyists and agents from polluting industries take over environmental protection, public lands and agricultural policy, who could be shocked?

But Alex Azar II? A few Arkies remember him. He was Kenneth Starr's first hire in 1994 when he took over the federal investigation of Bill and Hillary's little mountaintop land purchase with Jim McDougal in remote Marion County in 1977 that the *New York Times* said was suspicious. Azar had been a young political bulldog at Starr's Washington law firm. He left the Whitewater hunt after a couple of years, but it wasn't until the special prosecutor's final report in 2002 that it admitted that Starr and Azar had found no evidence that the Clintons even knew about McDougal's misdeeds in running a savings and loan company years after the real-estate flop.

Since then, as a deputy director at Health and Human Services in the second Bush administration, Azar collaborated with Louisiana congressman Billy Tauzin and others to protect the big drug companies from any government effort to rein in skyrocketing drug prices. Then he ran the U.S. division of the drug giant Eli Lilly, which was accused of drug price-fixing. Billy Tauzin, you may recall, immediately left Congress upon passage in 2003 of the Medicare law that shielded drug companies from price regulation and took a job, reportedly for \$2 million a year, lobbying for the drug industry.

Tauzin presumably was not available for the HHS secretary's job—too old maybe.

Azar could turn out to be a scourge of Big Pharma. He certainly will say that he's going to work for cheaper drugs. And, unlike so many people taking crucial jobs in the administration, like Rick Perry and Betsy DeVos,

he has some familiarity with the government health programs he will run, including Obamacare, which he will be expected to undermine.

Only weeks ago, Trump was saying that the big drug companies were "getting away with murder." At one point he had joined the chorus that Medicare should negotiate with drug suppliers for discounts on widely used drugs and criticized President Obama for not including that in Obamacare. It was a good point.

But the Medicare Prescription Drug Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003, for which Azar was the chief apologist and perhaps a central author with Billy Tauzin, prohibited Medicare from negotiating discounts with drug companies or from establishing a drug formulary. It would have reduced drug costs for the elderly and taxpayers by billions of dollars a year.

What are the chances that Azar will take up that cause seriously? In his last year at Lilly, he spent \$5.7 million lobbying Congress and the agency he will head to prevent transparency in drug pricing. During Azar's last three years running the company, Lilly's popular diabetes drugs Humalog and Humulin went up 20.8 percent, 16.9 percent and 7.5 percent.

Azar will succeed Tom Price, Trump's first and proudest appointee, who was forced to quit six weeks ago after Politico, the "fake-news" outlet, reported that he had spent more than a million dollars of the taxpayers' money in a few months on chartered jets to spots around the world while Trump was telling the country that Price was getting drug prices under control and wrecking Obamacare. (Actually, he did a pretty good job of the latter.)

Trump had put Price in charge of regulating the pharmaceutical industry in spite of the insider-trading scandal reported by his favorite paper, the *Wall Street Journal*. An Australian biotech firm trying to introduce a multiple-sclerosis drug in the U.S. market secretly fed Rep. Price stock at 18 cents a share, just before it shot up more than 400 percent. He introduced legislation to prevent regulation of a medical-device maker that he had bought stock in and that had given him a big campaign donation. He traded \$300,000 in health stocks while working on healthcare legislation.

Trump thought those experiences made Price a good man to drain the swamp. Alec Azar has similar credentials. Foxes who guard henhouses just need better PR.