

George Will, Shirking His Duty?

Tariff Critic Kept Quiet On Wife's Lobbyist Role

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By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

In his syndicated column Friday, George F. Will assailed the Clinton administration's proposed tariffs on Japanese luxury cars, calling them "trade-annihilating tariffs to coerce another government into coercing its automobile industry."

He repeated his criticism Sunday on ABC's "This Week With David Brinkley," calling the 100 percent tariffs "illegal" and "a subsidy for Mercedes dealerships."

What Will did not mention is that his wife, Mari Maseng Will, is a registered foreign agent for the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association. Her firm, Maseng Communications, was paid \$198,721 last year to lobby for the industry.

Will dismissed any suggestion of a conflict. "I was for free trade long before I met my wife. End of discussion," he said yesterday. "There are people in Washington whose entire life consists of raising questions. To me, it's beyond boring. I don't understand the whole mentality."

"What's to disclose? What would I say? That one of my wife's clients agrees with my long-standing views on free trade? Good God," he said.

But several newspaper editors said Will should have disclosed his wife's paid lobbying. "I'm very distressed," said Dennis A. Britton, editor of the Chicago Sun-Times. "That's one of those material facts an editor should know before placing a story in the paper. That's like a fi-

nancial writer having a stake in a company he's writing about."

Will did disclose on the Brinkley show last month that his wife was advising Sen. Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) in his presidential campaign and would become the campaign's communications director. Will, who mentioned this before questioning Dole, said he did so only "because ABC asked me to." He said his wife's

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role would not inhibit him in commenting on the Dole campaign.

Will is probably the nation's most prominent conservative writer. He appears on the Brinkley show, opines in Newsweek and writes a newspaper column that is syndicated to 475 papers by The Washington Post Writers Group. Maseng served as White House communications director and assistant secretary of transportation during the Reagan administration. The two were married in 1991.

The Washington Post was initially told of Maseng's lobbying by a Clinton administration staffer. The administration has been trying to deflect criticism that the tariffs would hurt American consumers and some car dealers. Will wrote that the 13 models of Japanese cars would be "unsalable in the land of the free and the home of the brave."

According to Maseng's Justice Department filings, her firm is paid \$200 an hour to deal with reporters, follow legislation, place advertising, issue press releases and draft op-ed pieces with such titles as "Selling Cars in Japan: It Isn't About Access" and "Fixing the Outcome of Trade With Japan Is a Dangerous Way to Do Business." The firm also sought to arrange for the industry's top Washington lobbyist to meet the Chicago Tribune editorial board, tried to place an opinion piece in the Washington Times and drafted letters to the New York

Times and Detroit Free Press.

Maseng Communications began representing the Japanese in 1992 and was paid \$47,422 the following year. Maseng did not respond to a request for comment.

"What Maseng provides is the strategic public affairs direction for the communications program," said Charles Powers, a senior vice president at Porter/Novelli, another Washington public relations firm that works for the automakers in partnership with Maseng's company.

Stephen Isaacs, associate dean of Columbia University's journalism school, said a spouse's employment "does matter. The same kind of conflict questions that apply to us also apply to our extended families. He made a mistake. . . . The fact that he doesn't see a problem shows he just doesn't get it."

Isaacs also cited a 1980 incident in which Will helped Ronald Reagan prepare for a presidential campaign debate and then praised Reagan's performance on television without disclosing his own role.

As for last week's column, some editorial page editors also expressed concern. "I would have preferred to have known in advance," said Brent Larkin, editorial director of the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Dorrance Smith, executive producer of "This Week With David Brinkley," said he was not aware of the connection. He said he had urged Will to disclose his wife's employment with Dole, but that a round-table discussion is "a different context" from interviewing a senator.

"I'm not sure where you draw the line," Smith said. "I don't know who Cokie Roberts's brother's clients are." Roberts, another Brinkley panelist, is the sister of Washington lobbyist Tommy Boggs.

Alan Shearer, general manager of The Washington Post Writers Group, said he saw no evidence that Maseng's employment "has affected George's judgment. . . . A lot of us have spouses who have careers of their own, and whether that requires us to disclose everything they do is a difficult question. It doesn't bother me."

Will, for his part, doesn't see what the fuss is about. He says he has never discussed the issue with his wife.

"My views on free trade are well known and antecedent to Mari's involvement with whatever the client is," Will said. "It's just too silly."