



# GET 'ER DONE

FIVE WASHINGTON HANDS WHO  
HAVE A KNACK FOR SMOOTHING  
OUT THE PROCESS

By SHAWN ZELLER

**T**he Washington fixer gets things done in a system designed to stop him. The founders meant it that way, to calm passions and to ensure that ideas aren't turned into policy before they've stood the test of time.

To overcome those built-in obstacles, time and again, and in the public eye, can leave a mark on the history books.

Other fixers toil for smaller victories. They are lawmakers, but also bureaucrats, lobbyists and staffers.

They must be smart but also charismatic, occasionally ruthless, and most of all persuasive. They work in public, amid the 24-7 news cycle, but also in back rooms behind closed doors.

The deal-cutters on Capitol Hill have claimed some victories in recent years, reaching agreement on the government's role in elementary and secondary education, on how Medicare pays doctors and on the powers of the National Security Agency to surveil Americans' communications. Each of those achievements took some serious fixing.

If Republicans overhaul the 2010 health care law and the tax code this year, it will take fixing at another level of magnitude.

Such world-changing victories have never come easy and they are all the harder to achieve now, given the ideological divide on Capitol Hill.

In this special issue of CQ Magazine, our editors and reporters identify five who merit the fixer title. Our list includes a lobbyist, a bureaucrat, two lawmakers and an activist.

One who is crucial in the health care debate is Virginia GOP Rep. Morgan Griffith, who—as a

member of conservative House Freedom Caucus—has worked to bridge the divide between the group and Republican moderates.

With America's Russia policy in flux—the result of President Donald Trump's effort to reset relations, as well as the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election—Sen. Lindsey Graham is determined to restore the United States to its traditional role as leader of the free world. He may well do it.

Lisa Curtis, who is Trump National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster's choice to oversee U.S. policy in South Asia, is well positioned to carry out Trump's pledge to ramp up the fight against foreign terrorists and bring pressure to bear on allies that could do more to help.

Ron Bonjean burnished his credentials most recently as then-Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch's spokesman. He came out of the Gorsuch fight unscathed and with fresh ties to the White House counsel's office. With an administration that continues to have trouble communicating its message, Bonjean is sure to resurface.

And if there is any hope for bipartisanship, Nancy Jacobson, a Democratic consultant who worked for Bill and Hillary Clinton and is the founder of the group No Labels, could root it out.

Her effort to pressure lawmakers to compromise has caught Trump's attention. And lawmakers will surely take notice if she follows through on a pledge to raise \$50 million for independent expenditures during the 2018 election campaign.

She may get there. Jacobson has already locked in the support of four billionaires and honed her message:

“Stop fighting. Start fixing.”



George Levines/CQ Roll Call

## RON BONJEAN

By KATE ACKLEY

**Communicating** effectively in a crisis has long been part of Ron Bonjean’s job description—even if he narrowly avoided being embroiled in a big scandal during his early days on Capitol Hill. In the late 1990s, a 20-something Bonjean worked for then-Rep. Jay Kim, a California Republican with the dubious distinction of conducting his congressional business while wearing an ankle monitor.

Bonjean moved to another Hill office just before Kim pleaded guilty to campaign finance violations that resulted in the lawmaker’s work-home confinement.

“I left two weeks before

that occurred,” Bonjean recalls.

Two decades later, Bonjean, 46, is now a go-to GOP strategist with connections in the Senate, the House and the Trump White House.

At a time when corporate and foreign government clients are still reeling from the disruption and opportunities of the new administration and the all-Republican control of the federal government, Bonjean offers an inside view that he says can help them navigate the political volatility.

The Trump administration sought his counsel on what is arguably its biggest win during the rocky first 100 days of

Donald Trump’s presidency. Bonjean served as volunteer communications strategist for the Supreme Court confirmation of Justice Neil Gorsuch—a divisive battle that resulted in a historic change to the Senate’s filibuster rules.

Liberal organizations worked to portray Gorsuch as a right-wing judge who would side with corporations over people in political money and other cases. Much of the news coverage of Gorsuch portrayed him as conservative but qualified, and the few stories about his ties to a reclusive Colorado billionaire, conservative businessman Philip Anschutz, did not cost him any GOP support.

Ultimately, senators confirmed him 54-45.

The goal of the short but intense campaign for Gorsuch was to paint him as “an independent and fair-minded justice.”

“We had a daily call with all the relevant players involved in the process, as well as just constant communication throughout the day on breaking news or media inquiries that were occurring,” he says of the pro-Gorsuch campaign. “We had a very proactive campaign initially to introduce the judge to the American people and to Capitol Hill.”

“My business partners were very kind and picked up some of my slack,” he says about his colleagues at ROKK Solutions, where he continued to work during the Gorsuch nomination. “So instead of having a work-life balance, I had a

work-work balance.”

It wasn't the only time that work consumed him.

Bonjean's first major communications crisis popped up in the final weeks of 2002 after his boss at the time, then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi, praised the 1948 presidential campaign of Strom Thurmond at the South Carolina senator's 100th birthday party.

Critics believed Lott was embracing Thurmond's segregationist views at that time, prompting calls for Lott to apologize or step down from leadership.

Fifteen days later, after withering criticism and a rare public rebuke from President George W. Bush, Lott resigned as Senate Republican leader. “It was a really unheard-of event that consumed Washington for two weeks on a 24-7 news cycle that required hyper-vigilance,” Bonjean remembers.

“It was pre-social media, but it was what Washington was talking about and covering and so it was just staying on top of the news coverage that breaks at midnight on the Drudge Report to getting a few hours of sleep and waking up very early and then going on all day,” he says.

What he learned from the Lott scandal, he says, was to line up surrogates and allies in advance, something he continues to do for his clients, which include the government of South Korea.

“I immediately, with our clients, have a vulnerability assessment,” Bonjean says, a sort of opposition research operation designed to precraft responses that might one day

come in handy. “They don't have to be spot on or perfect, but at least you're already thinking about something.”

On the Supreme Court nomination, Bonjean says he worked with a team of Gorsuch's former clerks as well as White House insiders to rapidly respond to any criticism or negative news stories, such as a New York Times report on Gorsuch's longstanding ties to Anschutz for whom Gorsuch worked as a lawyer during the early 2000s.

The Gorsuch effort also wasn't the first time Bonjean worked with White House counsel Donald McGahn.

McGahn was part of a legal team at the law firm Jones Day that brought in Bonjean's firm to help with crisis communications for then-Rep. Aaron Schock, an Illinois Republican indicted for using public and campaign money to decorate his congressional offices in the style of the TV series *Downton Abbey*.

Schock's once promising Hill career unraveled in 2015 amid reports he spent \$5,000 on a chandelier for his office. He was ultimately indicted in 2016 on two dozen criminal charges including for the theft of public and campaign funds, wire fraud and filing false tax forms.

“There was very little we could do to be helpful because each time we established a narrative, the legal process overtook it,” Bonjean admits.

The operative had more success representing the National Football League Players Association in the run-up to a contentious 2011 labor agreement with the owners.

“We had spent a year before the potential lockout

laying the groundwork of creating a communications strategy,” Bonjean says.

“Not only were we working in Washington and impacting Capitol Hill by doing fly-ins with players, but we were also making sure we were driving messages to key states that had stadiums and what the economic ripple effect would have over stadiums being shuttered.”

The Green Bay Packers fan in Bonjean relished the

Hill staffer, is often at odds with Bonjean on policy issues. His firm, SKDKnickerbocker, spearheaded outside opposition to Gorsuch's nomination.

Though occasionally rivals and from different parties, Thornell says he'll sometimes refer business to Bonjean if a client or someone he trusts is looking for a Republican.

“I respect his abilities,” says Thornell, a former deputy political director for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign



**ROKK STEADY:** Bonjean with business partners Rodell Mollineau, center, and Brian Walsh, right.

Tom Williams/CCRNoll  
Call

assignment.

“There was nothing cooler than to wake up every day and be on conference calls talking about sports, talking about football and how to save it,” he says.

Bonjean, of course, doesn't only work. He may be best known in Washington political circles for the annual Christmas party he hosts with his wife, Sara, that features a surprise B-list celebrity whom the couple hires to mingle and snap selfies with their guests. Recent guests have included rapper Flavor Flav and “Karate Kid” actor Ralph Macchio.

Doug Thornell, a Democratic operative and former

Committee. “I respect his experience. If he disagrees with you, he does it in a way that isn't disrespectful or disagreeable.”

Bonjean says his firm is growing and that he and his business partners are planning to move later this year into a bigger office space near the White House to meet demands of new clients.

“Companies, trade associations and coalitions require people that understand how to navigate the new terrain and who have stayed relevant to the new landscape and have the relationships to help guide and protect them,” he says.