

Wendell Potter

Courageously Blowing the Whistle on his Former Employer, the Insurance Industry

Apologizing for his Role in Insurance Industry

Have you ever done something, short-term or long-term, that you later regretted? Or did your vision of reality change so radically that your completely changed what your stand for? If so, did you then have the courage to admit your mistake and work to make amends?

It is a rare and courageous person who can make such a turnaround and admission. Wendell Potter, after a long career as a public relations executive with [CIGNA](#), is one such person. As shared on his [blog](#), Potter expressed his regrets to participants at a community rally for health care reform in Portland, Oregon, on August 29, 2009:

I would like to begin by apologizing to all of you for the role I played 15 years ago in cheating you out of a reformed health care system. Had it not been for greedy insurance companies and other special interests, and their army of lobbyists and spin-docs like I used to be, we wouldn't be here today.

I'm ashamed that I let myself get caught up in deceitful and dishonest PR campaigns that worked so well, hundreds of thousands of our citizens have died, and millions of others have lost their homes and been forced into bankruptcy, so that a very few corporate executives and their Wall Street masters could become obscenely rich.

This was just one of numerous occasions for sharing his story with community groups, reporters, and Congressional committee members.

A Full and Diverse Career

Mr. Potter, a native of Tennessee, graduated from the [University of Tennessee in Knoxville](#), earning a B.A. degree in communications and doing post graduate work in journalism and public relations. This prepared him well for his first job as a reporter for Scripps-Howard's afternoon paper in Memphis, where he wrote about local businesses and government.

From there, he moved to covering the governor's office and state legislature. Later, he was promoted to covering Congress, the White House, and the Supreme Court. Following his work as a reporter, Potter held numerous positions, including being a member of the public relations and international marketing team for the [1982 World's Fair](#) in Knoxville. Such work necessitated travel to Europe, Africa, and South America on recruitment missions.

Potter then worked in a variety of positions — as a partner in a public relations firm, as press secretary for a nominee for governor, and as a lobbyist in Washington, DC. His later positions at [Humana, Inc.](#) and The Baptist Health System of East Tennessee prepared him to be chief spokesperson for insurance giant CIGNA.



In a [Bill Moyers' interview](#), Potter shared that he felt “that what we were doing was the right thing. And that I was playing on a team that was honorable. I just didn't really get it all that much until toward the end of my tenure at CIGNA.”

A Turning Point

While visiting family in Tennessee, Potter was intrigued to read about a “medical expedition” in Wise, Virginia. Borrowing his father's car, with camera in hand, he drove to check it out. Having anticipated health care booths, he was shocked at what he saw on that rainy day. As he told Bill Moyers,

[W]hat I saw were doctors who were set up to provide care in animal stalls. Or they'd erected tents, to care for people. I mean, there was no privacy. In some cases — and I've got some pictures of people being treated on gurneys, on rain-soaked pavement. And I saw people lined up, standing in line or sitting in these long, long lines, waiting to get care....A lot of them heard about it from word of mouth....They could have been people who grew up at the house down the road, in the house down the road from me. And that made it real to me.

When Moyers asked Potter what he thought about his experience, he responded that it “was absolutely stunning. It was like being hit by lightning. It was almost — what country am I in? I just it just didn’t seem to be a possibility that I was in the United States. It was like a lightning bolt had hit me.”

Weeks later, as Potter flew to a meeting on a CIGNA corporate jet, enjoying a meal on a gold-rimmed plate, using gold-plated silverware, he remembered the people that he had seen in Wise County. As he reflected on the incongruities between his lifestyle and that of the millions of uninsured people, he realized how insulated he and his coworkers were as they worked in a high-rise building in Philadelphia. Working with numbers and graphs and striving to meet Wall Street’s expectations, Potter had not put faces on the 47 million uninsured, as well as the millions who are underinsured.

What to Do Now?

Back at CIGNA’s corporate headquarters, Potter began to pro-

cess everything. He talked with coworkers, shared pictures of what he had seen, and tried to figure out what to do next. He shared his struggle with Bill Moyers,

How do I step away from this? What do I do? And this was one of those things that made me decide, “Okay, I can’t do this. I can’t keep — I can’t.” One of the books I read as I was trying to make up my mind here was President Kennedy’s Profiles in Courage. And in the forward, Robert Kennedy said that one of the president’s, one of his favorite quotes, was a Dante quote that, “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of moral crisis, maintain a neutrality.” And when I read that, I said, “Oh, jeez, I — you know. I’m headed for that hottest place in hell, unless I say something.”

Becoming a Health Care Reform Advocate

Wendell Potter decided that he could no longer be a spokesperson for the greedy, Wall Street-focused insurance industry. When he left CIGNA, he did not “intend to go public as a former insider,” according to his [testimony](#) before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation on June 24, 2009. However, he knew how the industry’s “charm offensive” could shape reform that benefits Wall Street more than Main Street, and he decided that he had to speak out.

Knowing the tactics of insurance companies, Potter

speaks clearly and cogently. For example, in an [interview with Amy Goodman](#), he told her that:

[T]he thing insurance companies fear most is a single-payer plan. They fear even the public option being proposed; they’ll pull out all the stops they can to defeat that to try scare people into thinking that embracing a public health insurance option would lead down the slippery slope toward socialism...putting a government bureaucrat between you and your doctor. They’ve used those talking points for years, and they’ve always worked.

A New Mission

In May 2009, Mr. Potter began serving as [Senior Fellow on Health Care](#) for the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) in Madison, Wisconsin. Working from Philadelphia as an independent counsel based, he provides counsel on communications and planning. Potter is pushing for a fundamental overall of the health care system and for a strong media role as a watchdog in a democratic society. Without the latter, corporate influence in public policy is unchecked and increasingly influential.

Having been on the top, Potter saw what it was like on the bottom. His worldview and life changed dramatically. His experience and well-honed skills are now being used for a completely different mission.

Wendell Potter — seeing an “industry that is going in the wrong direction and taking this country in the wrong direction” — courageously carries on.

