



## Keeping Pace with Capitol Hill

**Craig Cooper**, 2006–2007 GSA–U.S. Geological Survey  
Congressional Science Fellow

One of the most amazing things about working on Capitol Hill is the pace: fast, relentless, and intense—jobs here definitely qualify as “extreme careers.” The days are long: mine typically starts before 6:00 a.m., and it’s a rare treat for me to get home in time to read a bedtime story to my daughters, who are usually fast asleep before I even leave the office. The days are hectic, filled with deadlines too numerous to count. For example, I recently had only four hours to convert over 850 pages of public responses to a 120-page Department of Energy draft into a one-page bullet-point summary, while also taking part in two hours of constituent meetings and engaging in negotiations on a mostly unrelated bill—and those tasks comprised less than 30% of my day! Congress is a tough place to work.

Yet, working with Congress is also intensely rewarding. There is something special about helping to craft legislation that impacts people’s lives in meaningful ways. My greatest personal reward to date has been the opportunity to work on the lead bill to mandate increases in automobile fuel economy. This bill is part of the energy package that goes to the Senate floor next week (Tuesday, 12 June—most likely, the issue will already be decided by the time this article is published). If passed in its current form, it will increase

fuel economy standards for the first time in over 30 years and ultimately save more oil than we now import from the Persian Gulf. If polls are to be believed, over 80% of Americans want improved fuel economy. Congress is spending a lot of time and effort trying to achieve this goal.

Fuel economy is one of many big issues, but big issues are only one small part of what Congress does. The smaller issues are just as important. For example, Senators Feinstein and Boxer recently introduced legislation to try to change U.S. law in order to allow an airport to help pay for the cost of installing soundproofing in an adjacent school (S.996). No large firm, national organization, or cadre of well-heeled lobbyists led this charge. This bill is the result of local government working with the federal government to help a small local school solve a large airport problem. This type of work happens every day, and I wish that more Americans understood how Congress works with local governments.

Unfortunately, most Americans don’t know that Congress is working this hard to serve the public interest. Newspapers and TV news don’t report the good things that Congress does. They typically report the conflict, not the cooperation. For example, on 16 May 2007, the U.S. Senate passed the Water Resources Development Act (S.1248) by a 91 to 4 vote. This bill, the

culmination of many months of hard work, authorizes funding to improve our nation’s water resources. It is an excellent example of how Congress can (and does) work together. Unfortunately, this news was nowhere to be seen in our nation’s leading newspapers. On 17 May, the political news on the front page of the *Washington Post* consisted of stories about the net worth of presidential candidates, the U.S. attorneys scandal, and the Paul Wolfowitz scandal at the World Bank. The only news references to the water resources bill were on unrelated “test vote” amendments on funding for the Iraq war. There was no mention in the news of how Congress worked together to help people—only detailed discussions of the leading conflicts and scandals of the day. The U.S. news media do not report what our government does. They mostly report what the government argues about. No wonder Americans think that the only thing the government does is argue!

The single most important thing I can tell you is that news coverage of government is generally truthful but not entirely accurate. It’s almost as if the media provide an action-packed overview of the “show” that is government. The conflicts are accurately captured, but the story is incomplete. It would be unwise to judge the “show” that is our government by the “trailer” that is carefully edited by the news media. Contact your congressional representative or senator if you want to know the complete story. This is a hard-working place, and a lot of good things happen here.

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