



Notes from the Staff Bench

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My GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellowship began with an intensive orientation prepared by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Once the engaging workshops and informative lectures on the inner workings of Congress and executive branch agencies were completed, the thirty-odd Congressional Science Fellows were faced with a deceptively simple question, “Where do you want to work?” Unlike any opportunity I can think of, the Congressional Science Fellowships (sponsored by GSA and a host of other scientific societies) are designed to allow the recipients a remarkable level of flexibility in their ultimate placement. We can work in the Senate or House; on a committee or personal staff; for a Republican, Democrat, or Independent.

I embarked on this endeavor with an inchoate understanding of how my choice might impact my life for the upcoming year. Beyond a cursory understanding of the differences in election cycles, size of constituencies, and other trivia from grade-school civics, I had no feel for the tremendously important cultural and procedural divides between the two houses of the U.S. legislature. I had no idea what committee staff actually did, and I misunderstood the role of the majority party. My ignorance was quickly rectified as I joined my fellow Fellows in a two-week, multi-component practicum, including advice from Hill staffers, many of whom had been AAAS fellows in the past. The placement interviews themselves offered perhaps the best insight into what life might be like in a particular office. We were also encouraged to independently research committees and members of Congress about which we had interest as well as take plenty of time for introspection about our own beliefs and goals. As a result of these combined efforts, we were brought quickly up to speed and were able to make informed decisions. This placement

process concluded with my decision to join the majority staff of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The first question I get from most everyone, scientist or not, when I mention my placement is, “What does foreign affairs have to do with science?” I freely admit that the earth-science connection to foreign affairs is not as readily apparent as it is to energy and natural resources or to agriculture. In fact, no AAAS Congressional Fellow of any discipline, from psychology to nuclear physics to medical biology, has ever been placed on the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the 36-year history of the program. However, the committee is involved with issues that are informed by most academic disciplines. In the realm of the earth sciences, the committee deals with issues like tsunamis in the Pacific, water resources in East Africa, and the international ramifications of climate change. For me, the committee held the promise of satisfying both a desire to bring more science-based perspectives into the policy realm and a deep interest in finding solutions to the common problems of human beings across the planet.

During my first month with the committee, I was fortunate to be able to help with the final planning and execution of a hearing on negotiations leading up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. As most readers of *GSA Today* are aware, climate change involves *global* issues because many of the causes (e.g., combustion of petroleum), impacts (e.g., sea-level rise), and potential solutions (e.g., financing of technology transfers to developing nations) are international in nature. As such, the Committee on Foreign Affairs and its subcommittees have jurisdiction over legislation and hearings related to negotiations and assistance to developing countries. Therefore, climate change has been a significant focus of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

At the time of this article’s publication, the United Nations Climate Change Con-

ference in Copenhagen will be history; however, our hearing in November 2009 provided an opportunity to highlight the key roadblocks to an international agreement. Because of the hard work of the committee staff and the chairman, the hearing was a success. The testimony of expert witnesses who have been following this issue since the original United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 and of Todd Stern, the head U.S. negotiator in Copenhagen, laid the groundwork. Members of Congress made statements and asked questions that rendered a complicated picture of interests and objectives that were sometimes in conflict with the concerns of other nations. I think that the audience was left with a sophisticated appreciation of the difficult path that lies ahead for the United States and other nations. But for me, seeing the preparation—orchestration is a better word—was as important as the content.

I have watched hearings on C-SPAN, but never understood how much is required to produce a hearing that is interesting, timely, and makes a statement. Selecting competent witnesses who can speak effectively to the issue at hand, understanding the positions of opposing witnesses, knowing the opinions of all Committee members, and anticipating surprises are all part of the process. As the committee tackles more science-related issues, I hope to be more involved in the legislative and hearing processes. And, I must admit, I look forward to returning to the best seats for viewing a hearing—from the staff bench behind the Members of Congress!

This manuscript is submitted for publication by Mark G. Little, 2009–2010 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, with the understanding that the U.S. government is authorized to reproduce and distribute reprints for governmental use. The one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and by the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award No. G09AP00158. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government. Little can be reached at MarkGabriel.Little@mail.house.gov.