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Congressional Oversight and Improved Decisions

The Congress shall have Power – To make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof.

—*United States Constitution*

I came to the GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellowship with little understanding or awareness of the role that Congress plays in monitoring and evaluating the programs of the federal agencies. Its authority is derived from the *Necessary and Proper Clause*, quoted above, and the numerous enumerated powers of Congress. As the author of federal laws, Congress has the wherewithal to ensure that implementation of those laws is in accordance with the spirit in which they were written. This oversight capacity takes the form of hearings, briefings, and reports to Congress. These interactions are sometimes hostile (e.g., the recent Gulf oil spill hearings); however, a mutually respectful and informed exchange has typified my experience with executive branch oversight on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Most committees with the power to introduce legislation exercise oversight responsibility over the federal agencies within their purview. The State Department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), and the Trade and Development Agency (TDA) are subject to the scrutiny of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and its Senate counterpart, the Committee on Foreign Relations. Practically, this means that any specific program or policy that is conceived or implemented by one of these agencies is subject to Committee investigation. For example, when the State Department launched its Global Shale Gas Initiative in May of 2010, it briefed committee staff. The program leverages government-wide expertise, including that of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), to assist foreign countries seeking to utilize their unconventional natural gas resources to achieve greater energy security, meet environmental objectives, and further U.S. economic and commercial interests.

Sometimes, the chain of programs and responsibilities is convoluted. For example, a developing country may seek a loan from the World Bank for an infrastructure project that promises a substantial improvement in living standards and a reduction in poverty but could engender significant environmental impacts. The World Bank evaluates the financial merits of the project, completes an environmental impact assessment, and prepares its member countries for a vote on approval of the loan. The U.S. vote—yes, no, or abstain—is proportional to its financial contribution (17% of the total vote) and is determined by the U.S. Treasury Department. USAID steps in to amend the Treasury's lack of deep environmental expertise by reviewing the World Bank's impact assessment for compliance with U.S. standards, which may differ from that of the World Bank and the host country. In turn, the Committee on Foreign

Affairs may ask USAID to explain their concerns about the project's environmental impact. To complete the circle, the World Bank and the developing country seeking the loan may provide additional information to all involved parties, including the committee. These intertwined responsibilities are complex, but so are international environmental and natural resource issues, and the best decisions are founded on good data and diverse consultation.

After some data collection and consultation of my own, I have accepted a staff position on the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The opportunity to continue with the committee is a testament to the reputation of the Congressional Science Fellows program and to the open-mindedness of the committee staff, who have always treated me as their colleague. I am also grateful to GSA and USGS for this opportunity, to AAAS for warmly welcoming me into the community of science fellows, and to Committee Chair Howard L. Berman, whose informed and reasoned approach to legislating is far too uncommon. If I might offer one piece of advice to the reader: Seek out a first-hand experience working with or volunteering for a legislative body, be it your town council, state House, or the U.S. Congress. While I have given an honest recounting in these reports, the most powerful and curious insights remain yours to discover.

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 is working on the staff of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. He can be reached at MarkGabriel.Little@mail.house.gov.