



Larry Meinert

Interesting Times—Part 2

My previous column was titled “Interesting Times...” because of the 2010 elections and the wholesale changes in U.S. government that resulted. A footnote was added prior to publication of the original article that even more dramatic changes had transpired due to the tragic shooting on 8 Jan. 2011 of Congresswoman Giffords and members of her staff. There have been countless inquiries to Giffords’ office in general and to me personally about the congresswoman’s health and miraculous continuing recovery. I can only say that I am truly humbled by the outpouring of goodwill from people worldwide as they expressed their heartfelt condolences and best wishes. This event has changed the lives of many people, including of course the staff, who have continued to carry on the good work of the office and the spirit of Congresswoman Giffords.

Her recovery continues to be an inspiration. I have talked to her during some of our weekly staff conference calls and can report that her recovery is amazing. I have no special insight beyond what her doctors have reported—it is a long road to recovery, and she is making great strides.

I had the privilege of attending the launch of space shuttle mission 134, the second to last shuttle launch, crowning a very successful 30-year program of space exploration. As the public knows, this mission was commanded by Congresswoman Giffords’ husband Mark Kelly, and the congresswoman was able to attend the launch. This was my first opportunity to witness a space shuttle launch, and given that this is close to the end of a very successful NASA program, I was honored to be able to experience firsthand the roar of the engines as this glorious tribute to science and engineering blasted into space.

When I returned to Washington and the legislative cycle of budget hearings and budget cutting, I had the opportunity to experience what few in the congressional arena get to do. I was offered the chance to work on both sides of the Capitol. I initially interviewed widely for my congressional fellowship in both the Senate and House and for both member offices and committee staff. There are many reasons for choosing any of these attractive possibilities. I chose Giffords’ office in the House for the reasons outlined in my previous *GSA Today* column (v. 21, no. 3, p. 18–19). In May, I had the pleasure of joining the staff of Senator Coons, the newly elected senator taking over the seat of Vice President Biden. One of the reasons I

chose this office is that Senator Coons sits on several committees of interest to geologists, including the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

The contrast between the House and Senate paints a fairly complete picture of the vision of the founding fathers in designing a balance of powers within the legislative branch. The House reflects majority rule, and I had the rich opportunity to experience the transition from the majority to the minority—a huge difference indeed. The minority party can only introduce bills and have them move forward with the concurrence of the majority party. In this era of partisanship, that does not often happen. The Senate is different on several levels. Although there currently is a Democratic majority, the Senate operates by consensus, and it is not an exaggeration that a single senator has the power to affect the path of the entire country. Thus, being in a Senate office is an opportunity to be involved at an entirely different level than in the House.

My portfolio continues to focus on energy and natural resources. As I write this column, we are preparing for hearings on several bills concerning U.S. energy policy. I attended a briefing on U.S. energy options during which Texas state geologist Scott Tinker outlined the various possibilities for energy use for the coming decades. To many people’s consternation, the discussion in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee focused more on the procedural points of finding authorization offsets rather than the merits of the various energy bills. It would take several pages to explain the details of such offsets, but suffice it to say that some people view this as political demagoguery rather than an expedient path toward solving the nation’s problems. At the same time, the offsets are pieces of the complex puzzle that has also included policy debates about suspending congressional earmarks, changing entitlements, and raising the debt ceiling as the country wrestles with long-term fiscal discipline.

As Congress moves toward solutions to important energy problems, it is clear that geologists have a central role to play in the discussion, and I am honored to be the GSA-USGS Congressional Fellow at this pivotal time in U.S. legislative history. In my next column, I will report on how U.S. energy policy has evolved in the 112th Congress.

This manuscript is submitted for publication by Larry Meinert, 2010–2011 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. G10AP00128. 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. Meinert is working in the office of Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) and can be reached at Larry_Meinert@coons.senate.gov.