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Fellowship Focus

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Li Like Mr. Smith in the fabled Hollywood movie, I imagined arriving in Washington as an idealistic AAAS Congressional Fellow and having an immediate impact on the legislative process through my adherence to the noble truths of science. In my mind's eye, I would craft brilliant legislation promoting environmental protection that would be resoundingly passed by Congress.

I shouldn't have been so naïve. My background in environmental engineering and air quality issues, specifically the politically contentious use of the oxygenate MTBE in reformulated gasoline, had piqued my interest in science policy and exposed me to the vagaries of environmental politics. So for me, the fellowship was my dream job: to become embedded in the legislative process.

The reality was a bit different from my expectations. To begin with, the placement process was an exhilarating yet exhausting experience – trying to find the right fit among 535 personal offices and scores of committee staffs on Capitol Hill. I was fortunate to have a number of opportunities, but I made what seemed an unlikely choice: the personal office of a freshman Congressman in the House Minority (Rep. Adam Schiff, D-CA). In an institution that values power and seniority, I deliberately chose to work for a junior member in the minority party. But I truly believe that I had one of the most rewarding experiences of any Congressional Fellow.

The office was young, hardworking, and close-knit, and I enjoyed the opportunity to frequently meet with the Congressman. I was quickly incorporated into the office team and shared the voluminous workload. As the only person in the office with a science or engineering background, I gladly took on entire encyclopedic categories of quasi-scientific issues although many were well beyond my own expertise: energy, environment, transportation, agriculture, and even space. In a nutshell, my job was to keep abreast of these legislative issues and advise the Congressman on upcoming legislative votes and whether to sponsor legislation or sign issue-oriented letters.

I knew I was in uncharted territory when I was assigned to draft legislation that would apply lessons learned from the post-World War II Marshall Plan recovery to rebuilding the Middle East today. When a senior legislative aide went on maternity leave, I served as staff on the International Relations Committee for several months. To my amazement, I found myself drafting legislative amendments to the State Department reauthorization bill.

I came to appreciate the extensive breadth of issues and demands on Members of Congress. I reveled in the year's experiences, from the thrill of watching my boss on the House floor read a speech I'd written, to the special treat of eating the legendary House bean soup in the Members'

Dining Room. The political norms differed so greatly from my academic and engineering experiences that, at times, I felt like an anthropologist observing a newfound tribe — the politicians. I bonded with my Fellow colleagues as we met frequently to share experiences and absorb the culture shock from adjusting to life on Capitol Hill.

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As the Fellowship year ended, it was hard to imagine what job could follow. Although I loved working on the Hill, I decided to follow a path more focused on environmental issues, from a very different vantage point: the executive branch. In my new position in the Climate Change Division of the Environmental Protection Agency, I find myself using the many skills I honed during my time on Capitol Hill: how to effectively distill an issue into its essential elements; how to prepare succinct, clear briefs; and even how to give the clichéd elevator pitch on a moment's notice. Most of all, I gained a tremendous confidence in my ability to quickly grasp new subjects and to juggle a more diverse workload than I could have ever imagined.

The experience changed my worldview in a way that no civics class could. I am now acutely aware of the political realities behind the legislative headlines. I more fully realize the critical importance of scientists and engineers understanding and being engaged in the societal and political implications of their work.

By Pamela Franklin

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DIRECTOR'S CORNER

Th THERE ARE FEW BETTER PLACES TO LEARN FIRST-HAND about policy and the democratic system than in the halls of Congress. The pace can be hectic and the demands challenging, yet the rewards of participating in the legislative process are immense. Fellows spanning the 31 years of the program attest that serving as a Congressional Fellow is the experience of a lifetime.

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