

The Job of a Congressman

By Lee Hamilton

It doesn't get a lot of attention, but a handful of Members of Congress have made it a practice to take on a different job for a day or two back in their districts during breaks in the congressional session. Some have driven trucks for long stretches on the highway, ridden in a police car as it patrols uneasy streets, taught in a local classroom, or served up meals in a soup kitchen. Every once in a while I longed for the reverse: to see constituents follow their congressman through its halls and committee rooms, to hear the scores of phone calls that come in each day insisting on a personal word with the Member, to read and sign hundreds of letters daily, to be constantly interrupted all day long, with crises both large and small, to be hospitable and available to unscheduled visitors who drop by, and to end the day lugging home a full briefcase whose contents still needed attention.

Ask people what their congressman does on a typical day, and they are likely to say that he or she gives speeches, votes on bills, and sometimes shows up on TV. Members of Congress do those things, to be sure. But that's just a fraction of what the job involves. There were many times during my 34 years in the House of Representatives when I found it frustrating that my constituents understood so little about what I did on a daily basis. There are several aspects of the job of a congressman for which I wish the public could have a better appreciation.

First, to be an effective legislator, a congressman must study and seek advice on a mind-boggling array of issues. Our society often rewards very specific expertise - in medicine, law, and other professions. But Members of Congress need to be generalists, understanding something about almost everything — stem cell research, global warming, commodity programs, missile defense, and much, much more. There would be no end to the criticism that would ensue should a Member of Congress fail to have an informed response to a question asked by a constituent, or not be able to speak to an issue raised by a journalist during an interview. One of the toughest aspects of the job is simply learning enough about very complex issues to intelligently make up your mind on several hundred difficult votes each year. You can't vote "maybe"; you must vote "yes" or "no".

Second, a congressman is expected to be an advocate - for individuals, groups and communities in his/her district, from assisting someone with their social security disability claim to helping a community obtain funding for a new road or bridge. I remember one time helping an entire town move several miles so it would no longer be threatened by floods. Given the increased size and activity of government, service to constituency groups is much more extensive now than is used to be. In fact, Members of Congress often complain that the need to serve as an advocate for constituents in their dealings with all levels of government is crowding out the time needed to do their legislative work.

Third, a congressman is also an educator and a communicator, translating the work of Congress and the complexities of modern issues to constituents, and listening to them. To be effective in this role, a Member of Congress needs to establish a rapport with all types of people - factory workers and CEOs, senior citizens, homemakers, and students. I do not know of another job that puts you in closer touch with more kinds of people than the job of a Member of Congress. A congressman must also be a good listener. I very quickly learned that no matter what the subject, some constituent would know more about it than I did if I took the time to hear them out.

Fourth, a congressman must perform the ceremonial function, serving the dual role of "ambassador" from the nation's capital and local dignitary. In this role a Member of Congress could fill 365 days a year attending community events and ceremonial functions at home. The invitations never stop coming, and Members are keenly aware that every invitation declined invites disappointment and criticism that their priorities may not be in the right place.

Finally, the most effective congressmen also act as consensus builders. Whether it is in congressional committees drafting legislation or in town meetings back home, the role of a Member of Congress is to provide political leadership to reconcile differing points of view and to bring about progress when the debate has gone on long enough. Controversy and conflict are unavoidable in a nation as large and diverse as the United States. Politicians keep the country going by accommodating different points of view and developing consensus. It really does take a lot of skills to be an effective congressman, but the skill of bringing people together, finding agreed-upon solutions to our nation's problems, is perhaps the greatest skill of all. Without that skill the country would come apart at the seams.