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Office of Sen. John D. Rockefeller, IV (D-WV)
Mid-year Report

A couple of months before I started my Fellowship, Popular Science magazine published a list of what they called the worst jobs in science. Twelfth, among eighteen that included some really unappealing ones, was Congressional Science Fellow. As apparently described to the editors by a former Fellow, “.... (the) fellows’ disillusionment is swift and merciless. ‘It’s an exercise in futility to get science across in Congress....’ ‘The side with more power wins, not the side with the best data or the most cogent argument.’” (Popular Science, November 2004)

None of the current Fellows I know has expressed regrets for choosing to spend a year on the hill, learning how the legislative process works and being as useful as possible. Some have extended their appointments. Others are finding permanent jobs in the public policy community. Many have been frustrated at times. Perhaps a few wish they had chosen different assignments, and more than a few will leave wishing that they had been able to accomplish more. If ever there are periods in which one can rely on data and compelling arguments to prevail in policy decisions, this is not one. But perhaps these are the most important of times to be here. In any case, the intellectual and cultural opportunities on the hill and in Washington are extraordinary, and it’s difficult to imagine anyone leaving this position without a sense of personal and professional growth.

I spent quite a bit of time finding a good position. I talked to about 15 offices, on both sides of the Hill, both committee offices and personal offices. It’s a process that I recommend, because it provides an early insight into how offices here work. One of the disadvantages (there are also advantages) of starting in January is that more than two-thirds of the Fellows start directly after orientation, and that cycle tends to dominate recruiting. In the end, there were three opportunities that seemed appropriate, two in personal offices and one in a committee.

For several reasons, I chose to work in the personal office of Sen. John D. Rockefeller, IV, of West Virginia. I share several of his interests, especially science education, science funding, telecommunications, and homeland security. In his office, responsibility for those areas is spread among three Legislative Assistants, which I thought would diversify the opportunity. Sen. Rockefeller is a senior member of the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, which I thought would provide some insight into how a committee works. To a large extent, it has worked out as I hoped, and I would make the same choice again.

Some of what I do here might be called odd jobs—assisting constituents, meeting with interest groups, or helping draft letters, vote justifications, or statements—all part of the daily life of Congressional Office staff. Beyond that, I’ve been able to take on several longer term projects.

The first related to math and science education, a subject in which Sen. Rockefeller has a long history of interest and contribution. The issue was that the Administration was proposing to eliminate research in this area in favor of support to States for implementing programs. My job has been to help make the case for needed research. It's been a good opportunity to understand advocacy within the Senate and among groups with an interest in the subject. Measurable success this year is small, but sets the stage for greater effect next year.

The second related primarily to a science funding program that focuses on building research competitiveness in universities, and thus is of particular interest in West Virginia. In part it was again a matter of advocacy for appropriations within the Senate and the interaction with constituent and interest groups. But it also became an exercise in oversight, as interested Senate offices, personal and committee, as well as the agency and constituents, expressed different concerns over the direction of the program. My job has been to sit in the middle and nurture consensus. It's been a good exposure to the oversight process and time will tell whether it has been helpful.

As of mid-year, I've become interested in a problem in homeland security that relates to disaster and emergency declarations. So far, it's provided good experience in legislative history and issues related to potential amendments to an important law that governs the Government's response to disasters. As I write this report in September, a couple of weeks after Hurricane Katrina, I suspect that it's a topic that will become more interesting as we move forward.