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Year-End Report

Good legislative aides are always on the lookout for important problems that their bosses might be interested in addressing through legislation. Many, probably most, ideas arise through committee involvement, but Senators are well known for their eclectic legislative interests and, of course, are always interested in addressing the concerns of their States.

Sen. Rockefeller is Vice-Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. From that background and because of concerns raised by West Virginia state officials, he has been interested in problems related to homeland security. In 2004 he hosted a West Virginia Summit on Homeland Security and will do so again in 2006. Several months into my appointment, the Senator's assistant for health care issues asked me to participate in a study of issues related to bioterrorism (an engineer is a scientist is a scientist). As with most such studies, it started with input and briefings from the Congressional Research Service, an arm of the Library of Congress with a staff of 700 who exist to provide research for, and just for, Congress.

During one of those briefings, a CRS scholar mentioned, as an aside, "Did you know that the Stafford Act would not permit the President to declare a Major Disaster in the event of bioterrorism, unless it also involved fire or explosion?" A little explanation followed: The Stafford Act is the law that permits to President to declare an Emergency or Major Disaster, most famously after natural disasters, thereby enabling various types of Federal assistance. The present definition of a Major Disaster, the more important declaration, limits it to natural disasters and, from any cause, fire, flood, or explosion.

This seemed like a significant, but sufficiently compact, problem that I might be able to do something with during the remainder of my Fellowship. Further investigation and discussions with CRS staff and other experts revealed that the problem was broader. Of the 15 planning scenarios that the Department of Homeland Security uses to guide disaster preparedness, 8 would not qualify for a Major Disaster declaration. And States affected indirectly by any type of catastrophe, for example through the transmission of toxic or infectious agents, radiation, or simply by evacuations might not be eligible under the existing law. West Virginia officials had, for some while, been expressing concern about impacts on the State from an event in the Washington-Baltimore area.

It was a strong enough story to convince the Senator's staff, and then the Senator, that this was a problem with both national and West Virginia implications, and a legislative remedy was needed. Shortly thereafter, Katrina and Rita drove home some of the points. So, much of my time during the last months of my term was devoted to this area. The end result was the preparation of a bill amending the Stafford Act that Sen. Rockefeller introduced a few days before the end of the 1st session and my departure. Its

fate remains to be seen, but the problems addressed seem sure to be tackled by Congress eventually.

I tell this story to illustrate how serendipity often plays a role in the experiences of Fellows—many tell similar stories—and why “carpe diem” and “play the hand you’re dealt” are good pieces of advice for Fellows-to-be. Even though it wasn’t “science,” the opportunity to develop a legislative package from end to end was a valuable addition to my earlier experience in advocacy and oversight (see my mid-year report), and nicely rounded the year.

It’s too soon, less than two months after leaving the Hill, to know whether my presence there will have had any impact, or what it will mean to me. A very large portion of the things I did there were of tiny significance, but perhaps numerous enough to have been worth the effort. I worked on some issues that the Senator might not otherwise have been able to address. A few important sentences and a few million dollars appeared in an appropriations bill, perhaps as a result. An agency adjusted its approach to research funding in a small way, perhaps as a result. Not all of the efforts I helped with had even small positive outcomes—the President’s FY2007 budget proposes a large reduction in an important research program in science education—but at least the battle was fought. And of course, the homeland security bill described above is in play.

Changes for me? I have a far greater understanding of how the Legislative Branch functions. There should be no misunderstanding, though, I’m still a novice. But I am finding ways to work on the policy issues I came to understand and care about last year, sometimes from the outside, sometimes continuing to assist the Senator’s staff. I look forward to a long-term relationship with the office. More personally, I have added Government relations to my consulting portfolio, helping one client, a small industry association, better understand both the Executive and Legislative Branches.