

## **Procedural Politics:**

# **Congressional Staffers Play Quiet, Vital Role**

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If you ask tourists what surprises them most about this town, you often get a response to the effect: “I had no idea our government was being run by a bunch of 20-year-olds.”

But their tone is usually one of begrudging awe and admiration rather than fear and foreboding. That’s because most are reacting to the bright, energetic young people they encounter in their Representatives’ offices as receptionists, schedulers, caseworkers and legislative aides. Very few tourists venture anywhere near executive branch office buildings populated by older, career civil servants.

I thought of this a few weeks ago when I attended a dinner sponsored by the Stennis Center for Public Service Leadership. In attendance were 80 current and former Capitol Hill staffers to honor one of their own with the first William E. Cresswell Congressional Staff Leadership Award. The award was named after Eph Cresswell, who served for more than 30 years as chief of staff to Sen. John Stennis (D-Miss.). Cresswell was present for the occasion.

The recipient of the award was David Pomerantz, a 32-year Hill veteran who serves as the Democratic staff director on the House Appropriations Committee. (Disclosure: I was a member of the award selection committee and served for many years with David on the staff of the House Rules Committee.)

Many attendees were middle-aged, but their eyes still held the spark of the 20-something idealists who first charged up the Hill years earlier. Some have moved on to the private sector, think tanks or administration jobs. Others are still plugging away in Congress as staff directors and policy mavens to Members, committees and leadership. All have been Stennis Congressional fellows at some point and share a love of Congress and concern for its future.

David is not atypical of those who have stayed on and developed expertise and networks of colleagues as friends on both sides of the aisle and in both chambers. He actually began his career in Congress as an academic fellow, on leave from teaching philosophy, but he stayed on to practice the philosophy of governance at the Rules and Appropriations committees — executing with aplomb the leap from the ivory tower to the towering inferno.

The Stennis award is designed to recognize those who have been outstanding public servants and proven leaders in guiding and directing others along the way. David was the ideal first recipient of the award, chosen by a unanimous selection committee. He had been a quick study in learning

the intricacies of House procedures and budgetary rules and had cheerfully assisted younger staff in learning the ropes necessary to climb the Hill.

As with the other dinner guests, David had been a Stennis fellow — part of the 106th Congress class (1999-2000). The first class of fellows was selected in the 103rd Congress (1993-94). Each class consists of roughly 24 senior staffers, divided equally between the parties and chambers. That means about 240 staffers have been Stennis fellows over the past two decades, including this year's 112th Congress class.

Each class chooses its own themes for study and discussion, ranging from civility and public confidence to mass media and technology's effect on democracy. They meet monthly and hear from distinguished experts in a variety of fields. At the end of each class's term, the fellows produce a report on their findings and recommendations.

One of the conclusions reached by nearly every class is that their bosses should be able to get along as well as the fellows had in working together on projects of common interest. But they understand how such hopes for their bosses are realistically hampered by little things such as constituents' opinions, electoral demands, interest group pressures and party leadership expectations. Moreover, Members do not have the luxury that fellows do of meeting once a month for two or three hours to get to know each other personally and develop a respect for each others' views.

I recently read a sad account of two young staffers who had developed a close friendship but worked for Members of opposing parties. The staffers thought they might be able to parlay their friendship into one between their bosses to work on issues of mutual concern. Their bosses were sympathetic but apologetic: Given peer pressures within their respective caucuses, it wasn't going to happen.

Nevertheless, there are other instances of Members reaching out and working on issues in a bipartisan ways that are not threatening to the partisan balance of power in Congress. Just look at the 300-plus informal caucuses in the House (known as Congressional Member Organizations or CMOs), most of which are bipartisan.

Granted, most are engaged primarily in information gathering and sharing. However, some of the groups do work together on legislative solutions to real problems, and their shared staff play a quiet yet vital role in the success of these efforts. It is a side of the Capitol Dome that doesn't get much sunlight.

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