

The House and Senate Celebrate Constitution Day and the first Congress Week

Constitution Day is celebrated on September 17th, the day the U.S. Constitutional Convention signed the Constitution in 1787. The law establishing the commemoration was created in 2004 with the passage of an amendment by Senator Robert Byrd to the Omnibus spending bill of 2004 (PL 108-447, Div. J, Title I, section 111.) The act mandates that all publicly funded educational institutions provide educational programming on the history of the American Constitution on that day. Senator Byrd kicked off the first celebration with a lecture in 2005 and the Senate has observed it ever since with a guest lecturer.

In 2010, the third week in September also was a celebration of the very first Congress Week, a national initiative sponsored by the Association of Centers for the Study of Congress (ACSC). Founded in 2003 as an independent alliance of organizations and institutions which promote the study of the U.S. Congress, the ACSC draws on the talents and resources of its members to promote study programs and research opportunities related to Congress. Many of the member institutions house archival collections of the papers of current and former members of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Among these are The Carl Albert Congressional Research and Study Center at the University of Oklahoma, The Dole Institute at the University of Kansas, and the Byrd Center for Legislative Studies at Shepherd University. A full list of centers can be found at congresscenters.org.

By designating the third week of September as Congress Week and fostering events at its member institutions, the ACSC promotes greater understanding of the Legislative branch of government. Its goal is to encourage civic engagement, inform the community and promote active participation in the political process. Because the House and the Senate are our highest national forums for civic discourse, it was determined to present a public forum about Congress for the first Congress Week celebration.

A beautifully renovated meeting hall in the Senate Dirksen office building was the setting for a panel discussion staged by three members of the ACSC: the Center for Legislative Archives, the House Office of History and Preservation, and the Senate Historical Office. The theme for this inaugural event was *The Constitution and Congress: From Main Street to Capitol Hill* exploring the range of relationships constituents have with their representatives.

When you ask members of Congress or any active citizen about the origins of their political involvement, they will almost always tell you it began in school, with a class that studied political issues. In light of this, an eleventh grade American Civilization class from the Key School in Annapolis, Maryland and their teachers were invited to participate.

The panelists were Don Ritchie, the Historian of the Senate; Matt Wasniewski; Head of the House Office of History and Preservation; and Ken Kato, political scientist on the staff of the Center for Legislative Archives.

Each panelist described his position and the institution he represents. Don Ritchie explained that Congress' powers all originate with the Constitution and they exist as originally stated. The original phrases have great weight. Despite this, over the 221 years since its adoption, two

different bodies have evolved even though they began with the same set of rules. The Senate as a continuing body changes its rules rarely and because one individual can derail legislation through a filibuster, the Senate depends on unanimous consent to move legislation. Hence it is a body characterized by more deliberation and compromise. Ritchie pointed out that there is so much to be learned by studying the records, even the records that are printed contain some unique gems of information. He recalled being amazed at discovering in a Congressional Directory of 1865, two separate lists, one of committee chief clerks and the other of news correspondents, and they were the same names! He concluded by saying that it is the job of the Historical Office to preserve the records so the next generation can write the history.

Matt Wasniewski began by pointing out that the House of Representatives has had over 11,000 individual members since its founding. In contrast, the Senate has had over 1900. This means that the defining moment in the House's history is every two years when a new Congress is elected and the House invents itself anew. This also is accompanied with an average 15 to 20 percent turnover in membership. The consequences are a body with a constant churning of events, ideas, and a closeness to the citizens that is direct and immediate. This is in contrast to the Senate which because of the six year terms that are staggered, is more of a "continuing body." Wasniewski's favorite research story involved an oral history interview with a retired elderly reading clerk of the House who was asked to read the roll call vote for the declaration of war on December 8, 1941. After the interview, he asked if Wasniewski would like to see the actual gavel he used and proceeded to produce the historic object which is now proudly on display in the Capitol Visitor's Center for all to see.

The final panelist, Ken Kato, a political scientist, explained that his fascination with Congress is in looking how the institution and its two bodies have changed over time. He views the House as "a machine" that churns out legislation, whereas the Senate is more like a "court of appeals." Working with the records over the years, he recalled some unusual discoveries including a radar plot map of Oahu from a Senate Pearl Harbor investigation to a packet of opium in some nineteenth-century House hearing records!

The students and audience were invited to ask questions of the panelists and there followed fascinating discussions of the evolution of the rules in the House and Senate, filibusters, the role of the House Rules committee, and a discussion as to whether the Constitution was a reaction to a bad situation or was it a plan for all time. For an event that was scheduled to last an hour, this continued for an hour and a half.