Revolving Door Scenario for Congressional Fellows*

David Hafemeister

I am grateful to have participated in the Science Congressional Fellowship program. This experience profoundly affected my professional (and personal) life. In particular, I am thankful for the guidance and friendship of Dick Scribner, who, as the founding Director of the AAAS Science Congressional Fellowship Program launched a thousand science and public policy careers.

In 1973, Scribner told the new fellows that there are two preferred paths in order to maximize the effectiveness of the program:

-- stay in Washington and rise in the system to continually affect the system, or

-- return to your home university or company and transfer to those institutions what you have learned of science and public policy.

I will describe a third path, which is a combination of Scribner's two desired paths. Namely I would like to address a "DC-Academia revolving door" scenario which alternates between presence and absence in Washington. In my case, I adopted this hybrid by spending about 1/2 of my time at my campus and 1/2 in Washington at university science and public policy programs.

My 12 years in Washington was divided among the Senate Offices of Senator John Glenn, the Foreign Relations Committee and the Governmental Affairs Committee, and among the Department of State Offices of the Under Secretary of State (T), Office of Nonproliferation Policy (OES/PM) and the Office of Strategic Nuclear Policy (SNP/PM), the Bureau of Strategic and Eurasian Affairs (START) of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and as a study director for the Committee on International Security and Arms Control of the National Academy of Sciences. In addition two years were spent at MIT, Stanford, Princeton and Lawrence-Berkeley Laboratory, working on national security and energy matters. For those who love acronyms, it has been my pleasure to work on EPCA, ECPA, NNPA, Glenn-Symmington, INFCE, NASAP, terminating Clinch River and Barnwell, spent-full return, IAEA, ABM/D&S, INF, START, CFE, TTBT/PNET, Open Skies, CWC, NPT, verification and compliance, minimum deterrence, verifiability of the CTB, stockpile stewardship, warhead monitoring, triad planning (1976-93), plutonium and HEU in Russia, Nunn-Lugar, and authorizations for ERDA(DOE) and ACDA.

Good Aspects of This Revolving Door:

One might ask whether the revolving door is a good path for a Congressional Fellow? As I see some of my friends rise in the system, I have wondered whether it wouldn't have been better to stay put, become an "expert" and get promoted to "boss-in-charge." Since we can't do our life experience twice, I can only write on what happened to me and not what might have been. First of all, the good side of my revolving door:

Flexibility, variety and timeliness: I have been able to work on what I thought was current and important. In most of my Washington offices, I have been the only technically trained person, given opportunity to quantify the issues at hand. By working on a great variety of arms and energy issues, I have had the luxury of often working at the steepest part of the learning curve, and thus I have been continually challenged. Since I have often been brought into the government to address a new topic for a "big push," or to create the idea for such a push, this has often given a timeliness to the work.

What you write is what you sign: In Washington, it appears that those who write, don't have the status to sign, and those who have the status to sign, don't write the major portion of their signed products. When back at the university, we must take responsibility for what we write by signing our names. Many of the Congressional Fellows have learned a public policy issue that should have been written up, but, alas, they haven't had the time and/or the freedom to put their thoughts to paper. And, of course, re-entry to the university allows the teaching of courses on science and public policy.

Lies and damn Lies: Each one of us can write a list of science and public policy issues which have been distorted by "politics" and bad press. A revolving door allows one to address these "damn lies" both in the government and outside the government. If a busy executive branch desk officer does not know the relevant "open" literature which goes above and beyond a current interagency study, then a revolving door can bring this data into the process. The biggest "fibs" I witnessed while in the executive branch were on SDI, treaty compliance issues, and the military significance of potential cheating by the former Soviets. On the other hand, public debate in the university or professional societies can lack the reality of decisions based on all the issues; it is the obligation of people such as former congressional fellows to bring a sense of reality to the campus. The biggest "fibs" I witnessed while on the campus were on discussions of relative risks in society and the neglect of practical economics.

An independent, but loyal voice: Congressional fellows are, by definition, hand-maidens to the powerful above them. When part of a government bureaucracy, it does not help ones career to be too contrary to what is perceived as the conventional wisdom. If one has a tenured position in another city, this can give one confidence to speak up when your Senator or Under Secretary is about to do something that you perceive is less than wise. It is the duty of the former congressional fellows to maintain the highest levels of honesty and objectivity in order not to be corrupted by the party line of the home university or government office.

Downsides to Becoming a Revolving Door:

What might have been: 'Aw shucks, we all might have been Under Secretary if we had only stayed the course. It takes about two weeks to adjust to the lack of phone calls from Washington.

Out of date, out of loop: Upon re-entry to the government, have we missed or forgotten those details which used to be at our fingertips? The challenge is get back on the learning curve to "get up to speed."

-Family chaos? Moving back-and-forth every few years can be stressful. Do you and your spouse flourish in two environments, one in Washington and one at your home university? If you have children, does change prepare them for real life, or is an incubation in a quaint college town a preferred route? (In my family, my wife has been mostly supportive and very adventuresome.)

Jargon in DeeCee:

Rather than write an essay on the interaction of NPT renewal with CTB negotiations and IAEA enhancement, I would like to close by examining some Washington, DeeCee jargon:

Pipelines in are pipelines out,
Loose cannon on the deck,
Nice up and nasty down,
OBE.

Pipelines in are pipelines out: In the interagency process on arms control, essentially all the working papers are marked "secret," no matter how trivial the essay. When a former congressional fellow arrives into the inner sanctum of the interagency process, he is initially viewed with suspect because he has too many contacts with the Congress and the public. Some in the Executive Branch have (accurately) referred to Capitol Hill as the "torture place" since they perceive it as an overly politicized body. However, the Constitution wisely gave the Congress the power to oversight the Executive Branch since concentrated power can go astray. With this power the Congress can assist the Executive branch to consider the wider issues, for example a CTB, rather than a more limited testing ban. Ultimately, good government has to have pipelines that flow in two directions. If the Congress and the public are surprised by sudden executive branch policy shifts without consultation, there is bound to be a great deal of trouble. On the other hand, telling EVERYTHING very crucial. Good government requires flow in both directions.

Loose cannon on the deck: When carrying on negotiations with foreign delegations or with the Congress, it is not useful for a negotiator to raise issues incorrectly or outside a planned framework (unless it is a walk in the woods) because then the negotiating partner can use this error or exaggeration as a means to derail useful discussion. This kind of negotiator is called a “loose cannon on the deck” because his/her heavy movements can splinter the wooden structures of the ship of state, much as loose cannons have done on real ships.

Nice up and nasty down: The road map of power in the Congress and the Executive Branch is a starting point to see how science enters into public policy making. These flow charts are often treated with too much respect. When you get inside a bureaucracy, you often see that effective power, influence and jurisdiction don't quite follow these neat boxes and flow diagrams. Furthermore, other -- less than nice -- bureaucratic behavior often influences the way work gets done. For example, these diagrams imply a status between an under secretary and an office of policy and planning. If the director of an office takes too much credit for the work done by his office and if he is overly fond of those above him and not very nice to those in his office,

he is then referred to as "nice up and nasty down." I met very few office directors who actually gained leadership this way, because these kinds of people are ultimately thrown overboard at sea.

OBE: This paper may be OBE by the time you read it, that is it probably will be "overtaken by events." In that case, please bring it up to date.

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David Hafemeister
Physics Department
California Polytechnic State University