

Neal Peterson

FOR RELEASE: 3/4/67 March 4

REMARKS OF VICE PRESIDENT HUBERT HUMPHREY
CONGRESSIONAL STAFF ASSOCIATION
WASHINGTON, D. C.
MARCH 3, 1967

Today I want to talk about you and what you do.

In any enterprise there are some people "who do the work." In the United States Congress, you are the people who do the work.

Yet the public is all too unaware of this. And I know some of you feel this lack of appreciation may also be true of some of your employers, some of the time.

But I have news for you: Even if it doesn't always show, we both need you and appreciate you.

I know the contributions you have made, and continue to make.

Many of you have seen your wisdom incorporated in laws which have been basic to the well-being of the nation and, for that matter, of all mankind.

Many of you have saved your Senators and Representatives from serious mistakes in judgment or action.

Many of you have helped to make committee hearings informative, penetrating and productive, rather than pro-forma and superficial.

And, you have done this knowing that the glory would inevitably go elsewhere.

Now, before I go too far and incite you to revolution--or even union--I want to make clear that I make this genuine praise of your professional abilities and personal sacrifice because you are both valuable and essential.

The work that we do together here on Capitol Hill essentially boils down to this -- the practice of the Art of Politics in a democratic and representative government.

Politics is simply the way in which issues are raised and decided.

In a democratic system, all the people are supposed to participate -- with equal weight -- in the political processes.

In a representative system, the great body of the people must depend on elected representatives to practice politics for them -- after they make the basic political decisions in their constitutions and the periodic election of their representatives and in some systems of their executives and judges.

So, only one small aspect of politics is what we generally call politics -- when we mean partisan politics or what the founders called factional politics.

It is, of course, no news to you that there is as much politics within the decision-making processes of a great federal agency -- or within your own Senator's office -- as there is in the competition for office of Republicans and Democrats.

Politics, further, is best described as an art to make several distinctions.

One distinction, of course, is in contrast to a science wherein truth is derived from a systematic accumulation of knowledge, assembled under neutral assumptions and through neutral methods.

A science of politics would have to be non-partisan-- and this contradiction of the nature of human society makes a science of operational politics most unlikely... and, in fact, unnatural.

The art of politics demands of the practitioner, therefore, whether he be the principal or his assistant, extraordinary skills of judgment and perception -- as to what is right and as to what will work.

The computer can never supply these skills in respect to people and society.

Another distinction which makes politics an art, is that those who practice it will display the same talents as do those we traditionally call artists -- painters and musicians.

The politician, like the great painter, must understand his difficult subject with high faculties of perception.

This art is representation.

He must also so describe and portray his work with such feeling, such compassion and such expression that he truly touches the lives and emotions of people. This part of his art is achieving responsiveness.

He must also be a master technician and craftsman so that he may use the tools he has to accomplish his purpose.

This is the art of making imperfect instruments and ideas into a successful whole -- in other words, the art of "creation" or just "making it work."

I think that it is in the practice of these arts of politics -- the arts of representation, responsiveness and creativeness -- that the congressional staff is essential to our democratic representative and limited government.

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The first thing you do for us is help us to understand and communicate with the people we serve.

When Members of the House of Representatives had only a hundred thousand or so constituents, a Member of Congress probably got along well with just a single secretary, or even with just the part-time help of his wife.

But with the increase in the population of states and districts, while at the same time the responsibility of government multiplied and deepened, the individual Congressman had to be a man of many parts.

He began to hire you to free himself from what Edmund Burke once called "mean and petty business."

I know how you feel each morning when you see the cart roll up and the bundles of mail are left on the reception desk. But I think we all know, too, that the business of communicating with the state or district is neither "mean" nor "petty."

Responding to and educating our constituents through replies to letters, press releases, TV and radio tapes and speeches, is the foundation of what we do here.

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The ability of the congressional staff to share with Congressmen the practice of the art of representation has quite naturally led to even more sophisticated functions.

It is sometimes observed that there really are four distinct and independent branches of the American national government -- not just the three mentioned in the textbooks.

The fourth branch, in this analysis, is composed of the great administrative agencies and commissions -- as distinct from the Executive Branch in the White House.

This fourth branch -- sometimes called the Bureaucracy -- sometimes seems almost independent of what we used to call "executive discipline" or control by the President.

It is this branch which President Truman was talking about when he said: "You say, do this, do that, and you push the button . . . and nothing happens."

The President and the Vice President are by necessity responsive to the people because they must be elected every four years.

Members of the Congress are kept directly responsible in the same way.

But how do we make sure that large and distant agencies, with permanent employees except at the very highest levels, keep in touch at the operating levels with the needs of people out in Huron, South Dakota, or in Johnson City, Texas?

How can we make sure what they do is human, compassionate, and adaptable -- within the letter and spirit of the law -- to the specific problems of individual people?

It is true that we have oversight on policies by Congressional committees and by the White House. But I can tell you now, from experience as a Senator and as Vice President, that this sometimes isn't enough--even in the best-run agency, staffed by the most conscientious and selfless people.

In my opinion, this is increasingly where the congressional staff--personal and committee staff--are practicing the art of making government responsive. Some of you are specialists in this art of getting a full and proper hearing and real service:

- for the retired person who has not received social security benefits she should;
- for the poor immigrant family that needs help to bring their relative to America;
- for the serviceman who has been unable to secure a review of an unjust conviction;
- for the officer of a small rural school district who is having trouble getting his application in order;
- for the small business loan applicant who needs help in getting through the red tape.

I hope you are all proud of the work you do in seeing to it not only that your employer is responsive to people, but that the agencies of government are responsive too. We are all Ombudsmen--and when we artfully represent our constituents before the administrative departments we perform an essential function to the preservation of democracy.

Just a few words about what the art of politics means to the proper carrying-out of this effort to insure responsiveness. The judgment and skill I referred to earlier come very much into play here.

There is a lurking danger of usurpation. This does not happen often, but the latent danger is there nonetheless. You wield enormous and largely hidden influence. Your employers are frequently preoccupied and harrassed.

Decisions have to be made or deadlines have to be met; letters have to be signed.

The need for speed and the Congressman's preoccupation with things more legislative open to you a number of discretionary doors.

The issue is not whether by an exercise of such discretion you get your boss into trouble.

The issue is that you yourself may act without public accountability.

This can subvert responsible government.

Self-restraint, character, and a constant willingness to clear with those who have constitutional authority are some of the "arts of politics" for Congressional staff.

There is also another lurking danger which is self-seeking influence peddling.

This, I believe, is rare; but it is not unknown.

Busy legislators must place an enormous amount of personal trust in your judgment and loyalty. They cannot spend their time watching your private actions and negotiations.

Because you are so situated, you can often have an effect upon the direction of both important legislation and crucial administrative decisions.

If you sell this privilege for your own personal gain, you do quite as much damage to the ethical fabric of our society as Congressmen do if they betray their trust.

And the issue is not only one of personal gain.

A call to an executive agency asking unjustified and illegal favored treatment for a constituent can erode the faith of people in equal justice.

The ethical line here is fine.

But anything that smacks of outright favoritism, of peddling for political or financial gain, corrodes the ethical foundations of the American system of government. This is where your art -- your judgment, your ethics and your loyalty come to play.

My third reference to your essential art was to your creativity in making democracy and our complicated federal system work. The American government consists of almost 100 thousand separate units of government, of every size from Local School District #1 to the great national government.

How does it work?

The answer is not to be found by examining the formal structures of the government.

To identify what really makes this complex system work, you have to look to the linkages and the relationships which fill out the cracks and crevices and open spaces in the structure.

Very importantly, the congressional staff is providing many of the necessary linkages.

Particularly among the congressional, executive and administrative branches -- but increasingly among all layers and levels of government, you embody many of the crucial connecting points which make things work.

Your personal and working relationships with administrators and with interest groups, the press and other levels of government . . . your ability to feed necessary information directly to the federal or state official who should know it . . . your sense of what is important among all the inputs of information you get . . . your sense of the right question to be asked at the right time . . . the energy you put behind the suggestions you convey --- all these aspects, and more, of your unique position make of you the invaluable mortar which helps to hold the structure together.

You fill out the communications process and literally make possible the dialogues of democracy.

An important element of this part of your art is the sophistication of your specialization as legislative aids.

The Congress must have the help of specialists. Staff specialization in Congressional offices, committees, and subcommittees is necessary.

But as with your role of public defender, there is a fine line.

You and your Congressmen have a need and responsibility to understand many areas of expert knowledge; but you both have another responsibility -- a responsibility to act as intellectual middlemen, as intellectual brokers between the expert and the lay citizen.

If you analyses and hearings questions become so occult and so rarified that you break the thread of effective communication with your legislators -- and through them with the press and public -- you strike a mortal blow at responsible, representative government.

Your most essential task, the essence of your art, is not to outsmart the executive and interest group experts; it is to make them express themselves so that Congressmen understand the human effects of expert recommendations.

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Finally, may I leave you with this:

Ultimately, you and I will be measured by our capacity to discover the long-range interests of the public, and by example, to maintain and improve the moral foundations of representative government.

There is no higher calling.

In the pursuit of this calling we are both the servants and the guardians of a free society.

This we must never forget. Freedom is our essential business.

For what avail the plow or sail,
Or land, or life, if freedom fail.

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