

Life Inside the Beltway: Interning for Senator Joseph Lieberman and the Senate  
Committee for Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

I have just returned to lovely snowy Hanover after participating in a three-month internship in Washington, DC. Working for the Minority Staff of the Senate Committee for Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, I had the opportunity to participate in the Senate's investigation into the nation's preparedness for and response to Hurricane Katrina. I worked on a major congressional investigation with a team of some of the best and the brightest people our government has to offer. In addition, while in Washington I was able to gain an inside look into the workings of the legislative branch of the federal government. It was the experience of a lifetime and one that I am honored to share.

Prior to beginning my odyssey to our nation's capitol, I managed to secure an internship with the office of Senator Joe Lieberman, from my home state of Connecticut, and a politician whom I knew of by name and reputation. Coming into the experience I had little idea of what to expect, as my knowledge of the government and the political system was limited solely to my high school civics class and what I had been able to glean from conversations with a couple of past interns. In addition, I was a confirmed engineering major, whose previous job involved designing skis, not exactly an ideal background to be working for a Senator in a town full of political science majors.

Before beginning my Senate experience, I had the unique opportunity to participate in an intense five-day Dartmouth training program called Civic Skills Training (CST). The idea of CST is to prepare a group of bright-eyed interns for the real world of political and public interest internships, and it ends up being a crash course in public speaking, concise writing and project management. For me, the most useful and rewarding part of the program was the almost daily panels with Washington-area Dartmouth grads who work in various fields of the "inside the Beltway" world. We met with Senate staffers, think-tank founders, journalists, judges and Robert Charles, the Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement at the Office of National Drug Control Policy. In talking with these alums and hearing their

stories, I was able to gain a real understanding of the value of a Dartmouth education and the places that it can take you. Having completed my training, I was now ready to step into the world of politics and take up a job as a Senate intern.

There's an understanding among Capitol Hill interns that 95% of the jobs are worthless. Legislative branch offices tend to be overstaffed with interns and severely understaffed with all other levels of staffers. The result of this employment situation is that the staffers are constantly overworked and the interns chronically underworked. Many interns in Senate and House offices spend their days reading newspapers, sorting mail and surfing the Internet; fortunately I was not one of these bored interns. Through a little effort and a lot of luck, I landed a job working for the Minority Staff of the Senate Committee for Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs in a job that was anything but dull.

Initially my responsibilities included attending hearings and briefings, collecting and organizing news clippings, running errands, answering phones, photocopying and whatever else one of the permanent staff members needed help with. After I began to demonstrate my competence level, I was adopted by several staffers who put me to work on any project they could come up with. At this point I discovered the joy of fact checking. For those not well versed in the art, for any document, speech, letter or report that the Committee or the Senator delivers every number, date, person and place must be checked to make sure that the information being put out is correct. Needless to say this task involved hours on Google and other search sites, as I looked up everything from former FEMA officials' current employment status, to the proper spelling of a town outside of New Orleans, to the situation of a corruption indictment against the former head of the Louisiana Office of Emergency Management. Possibly the most noteworthy and memorable of my fact-checking experiences occurred when I was tasked to check if the individuals for whom our nation's post offices are named are deceased. Though most were named after former politicians or life-long postal employees there are also post offices named for the founders of both KFC and Chick-fil-a.

From the world of fact checking I was then introduced to what would be the pinnacle of my intern experience, hearing prep. The product of the Hurricane Katrina investigation is two-fold: a report detailing what went wrong and how to fix the players

involved, and a series of investigative hearings that covered a variety of topics related to the hurricane response. For each of these hearings, one or two staff members on each of the majority and minority staffs were assigned to create briefing books for our respective Senators. These books included a background memo on the witness, detailed hearing questions, witness testimonies and biographies, opening statements, and any supplementary material that we felt relevant to enhancing the Senator's understanding of the message we were trying to get from the witnesses.

This process often involved 5-10 staff members rushing to write, edit, and reedit as quickly as possible before running the binder to the Senator before he left the night before the hearing. As someone who was in the thick of this exercise on a weekly basis, I can say that the process can only be described as managed chaos which, at times, devolves to chaos. My role in this process was to edit some of the documents, create charts and visuals, and compile and deliver the books. Not surprisingly, some of my busiest and most harried days working at the Committee were briefing book days.

In addition to my work with the Committee, my experience in Washington was made unique by the fact that I spent my days in and around the House and Senate buildings and the Capitol. While at work, I attended dozens of hearings, including ones on the reauthorization of the Patriot Act, the Iraq oil-for-food scandal, and trade practices with China. I became very familiar with the corridors of power within the Capitol Building. I had the opportunity to meet a number of Senators, Secretaries and top agency and administration officials. While in the Capitol complex I was able to go into the gallery, cloakroom and floor of the Senate, the latter two of which are completely inaccessible to the public and even to most other interns. But the most important thing I was able to gain from my internship was a real knowledge about how our federal government works. In learning the ins and outs of the legislative process, I was able to gain an understanding (as well as develop a healthy level of cynicism) about who runs this country and how they accomplish this task.

I picked up several habits during my time in DC, not the least of which is a full-fledged news addiction. I think it must be the constant presence of Wolf Blitzer and the talking heads of CNN that seem to permeate the many television screens of the Senate office buildings, but coming back I defiantly find myself reading the New York Times

and Washington Post cover every day and checking the Drudge Report incessantly. But importantly and hopefully more long-lasting than my addiction to the state of the world is my interest in public policy. I came back from my internship with a desire not to work in the public sector again but with the desire to further understand how it works. I've found myself now far more interested in the intricacies of the bureaucratic process than I ever thought possible. This interest has translated itself into the continuation of my internship study through a minor in comparative public policy and an independent study into the nature and effect of political appointees on the American political system with a specific focus on my new "favorite" organization, the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Overall, my internship was an extremely valuable experience and one that I would have not been able to get while staying in Hanover. I would like to thank the Rockefeller Center and the John French Memorial Grant for enabling me to have this opportunity, as it truly was an amazing and life-changing term.