



THE VIEW

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HAS THE PAST REALLY PASSED?

BY

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One of the more interesting exercises as a teacher in the field of political science is that of trying to induce students to understand how events in the past set precedents that are still being adhered to today. There is no better place to communicate the reality of such a notion than in the nation's capital, Washington, D. C. The Stennis-Montgomery Association, an organization on the Mississippi State University campus that facilitates the involvement in activities of a political nature by students regardless of their academic interest, just returned from its annual Washington Week activities. The excitement of being in Washington with a group of students never wears thin.

Being in Washington when Congress is in session gives one the distinct feeling of being immersed in history yet living in the present in a way felt more keenly than any series of lectures in a Mississippi classroom could possibly do. The return of the debate over the powers of the executive branch as compared to those of the legislative branch is a good example.. The war in Iraq and issues related to powers of search and seizure, due process, and the right to trial by jury are just a few of the issues that are fueling the discussion over the power of the Presidency as opposed to that of the Legislative branch.

One of our long days in Washington began with a history lesson and ended with a lesson in current affairs. Although each happened some 230 years apart, they were nevertheless tied together by the path of precedent set by a certain historic event that we still abide by today. Former Congressman and current President of the United States Capitol Historical Society, Ron Sarasin guided the Stennis-Montgomery Association on a tour of the capitol as only he can do.

His discussion of the events depicted by the statues, frescoes, carvings and paintings is breathtaking.

As we stood in the rotunda listening to him explain the origins and meanings of the large paintings surrounding the hall, one image in particular riveted my attention. It was the painting of General George Washington stepping forward, document in hand, to resign his commission as commander of the colonial forces following the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War. He is surrounded by a number of generals in his command who are there trying to dissuade him from giving up his position as head of the military in the fledgling country. I often tell my students that the greatness of our country is attributable in no small measure to luck. Somehow the right people with the right ideas showed up at the right time and we have been the beneficiaries as citizens ever since. This is just such a case. General Washington refused to listen to the Generals who were clearly reflecting the fears of a people who had little faith that government under the Articles of Confederation would be a success. These fears caused many to call for Washington to serve indefinitely as the nation's combined military and civilian leader. General, soon to be civilian, Washington opined that this must be a nation governed by the consent of the governed and not by force. Hence, he aided in our avoidance of the creation of an all powerful monarchy. The present Constitution was written to replace the fatally defective Articles of Confederation, and George Washington did indeed serve as the first President of the United States, but he set additional precedent by refusing to serve more than two four year terms. His fear of establishing a head of state approximating a king was great.

So much for history. In the afternoon the members of the Stennis-Montgomery Association attended a dialogue with Colonel Chris Allen, Director of the United States Special Operations Commands Washington Office. Colonel Allen recently returned from his assignment as Special Assistant to the U.S. Ambassador in Pakistan. In response to a number of questions Colonel Allen clearly and effectively stated his notions of the proper relationship of the uniformed military to civilian policy makers. Whether the subject was the conduct of military action in Iraq or Afghanistan or the current debate over gays in the military, Colonel Allen exuded clarity in his understanding of the roles of those in the policy making arena and those in the military. One could not help but gain confidence from Colonel Allen's explanations. Nevertheless, the debates over the powers of the executive branch to make war and the role of the congress to assist or impede in that war making are escalating as they haven't since the Nixon administration. The old term "The Imperial Presidency" coined by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. as the title

of his 1960's book has been dusted off and is coming back into usage by the pundits.

It is indeed a profound experience to be reminded of the establishment of this unique relationship between the legislative and executive branches over two centuries ago thanks to the wisdom of General George Washington and to see that relationship still agonized over and protected by those on the front lines like Colonel Chris Allen in 2007. Twenty four students were able to leave the textbooks behind and see for themselves the relationship of history to current affairs.

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