



THE VIEW

Issue #31

March 8, 2010

TWO WEEKS IN WASHINGTON PROVES INSTRUCTIVE

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There is nothing like back-to-back weeks in Washington in the midst of nationwide partisan political combat to whet the appetite of even the most cynical political junkie. Over the course of rambling over and through Capitol Hill and beyond during these two weeks, I became aware of a recurring observation. The nation's capital is very busy right now – so busy in fact that the partisan rancor that many of us out in the countryside have learned to live with is rarely in evidence.

It is most refreshing to observe that in contrast to what FOXNEWS or MSNBC seem to continuously try to convince us of, everybody in Washington does not spend their days trying to pick fights over political ideology. Rank and file Washington is too busy for that right now. Perhaps there are some explanations as to why this might be the case. For starters, it is an election year. The need to campaign means that politicians had better accomplish what they can before going home and facing the increasingly angry voters. Secondly, it is budgeting season. It is hard not to notice the number and variety of purveyors of issues and causes swirling around the lobbies, hallways and meeting rooms of virtually every office building and hotel in Washington. If you like watching the intricate machinery of government in high gear then this is your season.

Even here in the territory that we, in the hinterlands, have come to consider “ground zero” of the partisan war, one could gain some relief from the atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust and at times outright hatred that has manifested itself on us back home. At least on the surface the teeming masses scurrying about Capital Hill and vicinity were entirely too busy to stop and berate each other over party loyalties. When questioned, many maintained that party affiliation is rarely mentioned in “mixed (bi-partisan) company.” However, there is no doubt that at receptions and other functions where all attendees are from the same political stable the guard is let down in order to pillory the other side.

During the Washington Week activities of Mississippi State University's Stennis-Montgomery Association the student group heard from back-to-back sessions of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and the National Republican Campaign Committee. Both organizations are clearly focused on the pivotal mid-term elections this fall. The Democrats seemed to be more concerned with rekindling the frenetic pace that characterized the highly successful 2008 campaign. They claimed to have left that arena with a database of 13 million names of potential volunteers who they hoped to be able to motivate to action without President Obama at the top of the ticket. The Republican campaign folks readily admitted that they had learned the lesson of technology pioneered first by Howard Dean and then by the Obama campaign. The Republican staffers claimed, with some solid evidence to back those claims, that they were taking these approaches and perfecting them with their brand of organization. Of interest in both of their presentations was the Tea Party movement.

As might be expected, the Democrats didn't appear to put much credence in the Tea Party claim that the movement is non-partisan. On the other hand the Republicans expressed confidence in the belief that if the Tea Partiers had to choose they would vote for the GOP on virtually every occasion. This confidence was expressed with a hint of concern, however, as to whether the Republicans could control the Tea Party or the Tea Party would control them. Respect, even with a touch of disdain for the other, was evident on the part of both Republicans and Democrats.

So what are we to make of this boiling cauldron where everything is political yet "hyper-partisanship" is kept under wraps until the appropriate time? A few explanations present themselves. First, for those whose livelihood is earned in this environment there appears to be a set of basic but unwritten rules of civility that must be followed if one is to be successful. Secondly, for every big issue like those related to health care reform or job creating stimulus packages there are hundreds of opportunities that redound to the advantage of stakeholders regardless of party affiliation. Thirdly, the cable news networks, bloggers, and tweeters who are active 24 hours a day are far more interested in reporting on partisan rancor than old boring civility. Such news reporting has us all believing that we aren't being good soldiers if we aren't choosing sides.

One final thought provides a different, more somber twist. This one raises the question of whether or not the current atmosphere of regular collaboration between Republicans and Democrats inside the beltway is the very thing that incites citizens to rage against all incumbents. More and more, it seems that it is Americans scattered far beyond the nation's capital who are demanding that partisan rancor prevail. They have claimed on several occasions that Washington is too busy doing what Washington does to listen. To be sure, a great deal of time between now and November 2010 will be spent by both parties trying to discern what is going on "out here" and whether or not there is a way of harnessing it for the respective party's advantage.



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