

A Taste of Real-World Politics: The Washington Semester Program

Undergraduates who appear in Richard Fenno's office to interview for slots in the Washington Semester program are sure to notice a framed editorial cartoon on display. It shows caricatures of politicians (you know, rotund and prosperous, frock-coated, string-tied), haranguing each other while John Q. Taxpayer haplessly looks on, naked but for a suspended rain barrel. The caption reads: "Budget Battle!" Timely, and to the point, they may think, after following the endless Congressional sessions, the buzz words and phrases of 1990—"capital gains," "progressivity," "flip-flop on taxes," "the burden of deficit-reduction." Fenno, with undisguised glee, has shown it around the poli sci department, but not for reasons of timeliness. The date on the cartoon is: February 10, 1943.

Plus ça ever-loving change, eh? That's only one lesson Rochester juniors are likely to learn as Congressional interns, spending the spring term writing speeches, note-taking at subcommittee hearings, sorting through constituent mail from farmers, union members, and plain citizens-without-portfolio, and generally taking on an active role in the political process—as well as in their own education.

"The program is essentially a classic *quid pro quo*," says Fenno, who has been involved in Washington Semester since it started in 1968, and has directed it for a number of years. "Senators really want these kids, and not only because they are a source of cheap staff work. The students have something to give. They are intelligent (we look hard at the GPAs of those we send), they have energy, they are not jaded.

"For the students, of course, it's a taste of real-world politics. They quickly come to realize that there are many constituencies in this country, and since they work for legislators who are not representatives of their own districts, it's a valuable cross-cultural experience as well."

And these are not part-time, go-fer positions. The students don't spend time staring at copying machines or brewing on the Mr. Coffee. The C-Span viewers who have noticed the banks of young people seated behind legislators in hearing rooms, hearkening to whispered confidences, taking up scrawled notes and hustling away, have most likely caught sight of one of the 10 or so Rochester students who go to Washington each year, totaling 176 in the past 22 years. They don't take classes on the side at a university in the D.C. area, as

is the case with many of these college programs; for 10 to 12 hours a day, for over three months, they are bona fide members of a professional Congressional staff—with all of the splendors and miseries that includes. Their full semester's credit comes from their work.

As would be expected, most of the interns are poli sci or history majors, but that's not a requirement. "The system self-selects those who can make politics their life's work," says Fenno. "We also try to send students who have the entrepreneurial spirit, who willingly take on responsibility, who show initiative. Psychology majors have participated in the program, as well as a surprising number of pre-med and science students. All the expertise required is a consuming interest in politics."

At least one of the interns has found the life very much to his taste. Fresh out of law school in 1986, Bobby Cordaro '83 ran as a Democratic challenger to an entrenched Republican in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Cordaro ran an effective race, but lost narrowly. He doubtless has the makeup for a return to the political scene, however, something Fenno noticed right off at the start of Cordaro's Washington Semester. "We knew Bobby was meant for the life when he was the only intern who managed to get himself a parking space under the Sam Rayburn Building."

The interns also get the benefit of real-life political seances with Professor Fenno himself, who periodically checks in on their progress as he sweeps in and out of Washington on the trail of one of his senatorial subjects. Last year he was adding the finishing touches to his portrait of New Mexico's Pete Domenici (*The Emergence of a Senate Leader* is being published early in 1991), and this spring he will invite the interns to join him in looking over the shoulders of Maine's William Cohen and Arkansas' David Prior, among others.

Close proximity to politicians and the process might also breed in the Rochester students not a flippant, throw-the-bums-out contempt for the men and women of the American Constitutional system, but rather a new respect. Particularly if they look over Fenno's shoulder, and see with his eyes. They might weigh Fenno's notion that "96 percent of congressmen and senators were returned, in the election of 1990, not merely because incumbents have a financial advantage—although they do—but also because they are representing their districts and states with effectiveness while holding on to



Budget battle 1943: Some things are eternal.

their dignity and integrity. The great majority *deserved* reelection."

The students might also come to agree with Fenno, that recent talk about term-limitation, might also be, unfortunately, "a bad idea whose time has come." Fenno winces at what California voters did to their state legislature in 1990 through a ballot proposition.

"They had an assembly and state senate that formed a model not only for other states but for other nations. Then they voted to blow it up. In limiting terms, they guaranteed that in six to eight years there will be no elected representative in Sacramento who knows anything, and the lawmaking will be almost the exclusive province of those who do—lobbyists and organized special interests."

Fenno believes—and the Rochester Washington interns will have to decide from hands-on experience whether or not they go along—that certain 18th-century politicians (Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Hamilton, Jay, that crowd) did not want a government that worked too efficiently. That the checks and balances they inserted into the Constitution were *meant* to make legislating an arduous, painstaking, and time-consuming process. If the interns are lucky they will get to witness something along the lines of the Great Budget Battle of 1990, which to Fenno was not reflective of a "Washington mess," but of "intelligent and well-motivated people disagreeing over real issues and real principles of governance."

For the last lesson they are likely to learn from an immersion in Washington politics, Rochester interns could skip ahead, to page 93 of Fenno's *Watching Politicians*: "One returns to Capitol Hill asking of our representative institution not, 'How come you accomplish so little?' but, 'How come you accomplish anything at all?'"