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WHEN SERVICE AND DUTY MORPH INTO POWER AND PRIVILEGE

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When does service and duty in Washington morph into power and privilege?

When years in office teaches one how Washington works, how to get along on “just talk,” how to get-re-elected, how to avoid personal controversy, how to get your work done and how to frustrate your rivals.

Frank Capra exposed this problem nearly 75 years ago in *Mister Smith Goes to Washington*. That film had a happy ending. There are no such happy endings in Washington because, truth to tell, the capitol runs on power and privilege not service and duty. The result is continuous squabbling, finger pointing, heated rhetoric, and final agreement by trading votes for support. And a current Congressional job approval rating (Gallup) of 14 percent.

Each of the sixteen members of Congress listed below, along with Vice-President Joe Biden, has held office for 36 years or longer. All of them have mastered the ways of power and privilege in Washington.

**John Dingell D-MI: 57 yrs
John Conyers D-MI: 48 yrs
Charles Rangel D-NY: 42 yrs
Bill Young R-FL: 42 yrs
Thad Cochran R-MS: 40 yrs
Don Young R-AK: 39 yrs
Patrick Leahy D-VT: 38 yrs
Max Baucus D-MT: 38 yrs
Chuck Grassley R-IA: 38 yrs
Tom Harkin D-IA: 38 yrs
George Miller D-CA: 38 yrs
Henry Waxman D-CA: 38 yrs
Ed Markey D-MA: 36 yrs
Joe Biden D-DE: 36 yrs
Orrin Hatch R-UT: 36 yrs
Barbara Mikulski D-MD: 36 yrs
Nick Rahall D-WV: 36 yrs**

Years in office among the seventeen currently active members total 676. Twelve are Democrats, five are Republicans. Only one is a woman. There are two long office-holding members from Michigan, Iowa, and California. The two from Michigan, both Democrats, have held office for a total of 105 years. Only one is from the Deep South. There are none from Texas.

Adding the years of office-holding by the five members whose tenure ended in January 2013 raises the total to 860. Those five are: Pete Stark (D-CA, 40 yrs); Daniel Akaka (D-HI, 36 yrs); Norman Dicks (D-WA, 36 yrs); Dale Kildee (D-MI, 36 yrs); and Richard Lugar (R-IN, 36 yrs). When he retired in 1994 after 38 years in office Robert Michel (R-IL) denounced his colleagues for being more interested in picking fights than passing laws.

When does service and duty in Washington morph into power and privilege? When you begin to think that the rest of the country looks like Washington. That there are no important differences between California, Utah, Michigan, Iowa, Florida, and Vermont. Between the Midwest, the east and west coasts, and the Deep South.

When what really matters is knowing how Washington works and how best to get it to work for you and against your rivals. Turning John Kennedy famous inaugural exhortation on its head your mantra has become: “concern yourself not with what you might do for your country, but with what Washington can do for you.”

When your career is constructed around on “just talk,” with talk that is not truly interactive and substantive. In press conferences where you are talking into a camera, and you can dodge probing questions by calling on friends in the press. In commercial messages and on your website where there is virtually no human inter-action. In prepared speeches in Congress that are set pieces for C-SPAN usually in an empty chamber. At rallies and other public events where you end up working the rope line with meaningless comments such as “good to see you,” “glad you’re here,” “counting on your support.”

When “I misspoke” excuses any spoken gaffe.

Notice the presidential “just talk” as he enters Congress to present the State of the Union address and as he exits. Notice how often meetings across the aisle end with nothing accomplished. The parties involved cannot get to real inter-action because power rules.

When you don’t even have to talk in order to win favor. Photo opportunities with constituents. Or somebody else – a press agent – takes charges of interpreting you to the public. Or your party hires strategists and pollsters to face off against the other party’s hired hands on cable TV, trying their very best to out-shout one another. Talking heads specialize in “just talk.”

When you support a colleague’s initiatives in Congress in order to win his/her support for your own.

When you no longer have a mind and conscience of your own. You always follow the party line.

When you learn that leadership involves risk and avoiding risk is the way to remain in office.

When you state publicly that one of the important advantages of holding office for years is that it makes you eligible for choice committee assignments.

When, as with Paul Sarbanes (D-MD) who left office in 2006 after 36 years first in the House and then in the Senate, you see your son elected in 2006 to the very same House seat you held years before.

Lesson: do not expect statesmanship and leadership from a system that thrives on power and privilege. With apologies to Frank Capra, expect instead what we've had for years: gridlock grounded in excess political testosterone.

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