



“May you live in interesting times...”

Larry Meinert

Many have heard of this reputed Chinese proverb. The current political climate, both in Washington D.C. and the nation at large, is nothing if not interesting. It might be argued that I began my service as the 25th GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow in uniquely interesting times, with sweeping electoral changes, spiraling national debt, and growing worries about the country's future.

For those not familiar with the Congressional Science Fellowship program, this year there are 29 Congressional Science Fellows, each sponsored by a major scientific organization, such as the American Chemical Society, the American Physical Society, and, in my case, a partnership of the Geological Society of America and the U.S. Geological Survey. All are under the larger umbrella of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Congressional Science and Engineering Fellows Program. More information about the GSA-USGS Fellowship is available at www.geosociety.org/csf/scifello.htm. I can say from first-hand experience that it is a fantastic opportunity, and I would encourage all geologists, at any stage of your career, to consider applying. It will be the best year of your life.

The fellowship year starts 1 September with a two-week orientation program run by AAAS. Fellows are mentored about the intricacies of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government and provided with practical advice from former fellows about their experience and how to survive and make an impact on federal policy. The network of current and former fellows is extremely valuable. Current and former fellows serve in key staff positions in Congress and federal agencies; they can be consulted for information and counsel.

After the orientation program, fellows are turned loose on Capitol Hill to find where they will work for the rest of the fellowship year. Following the advice of many former fellows, I interviewed broadly, including the personal offices of Representatives and Senators, committee offices in the House and Senate, and with both Democratic and Republican staffs. Another consideration was that many of the personal and committee offices I interviewed with were going to be affected by the then-upcoming November elections. Thus, one could be in the position of selecting an office or committee that might not exist in another month!

In the end, I joined the staff of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords* (D-AZ). I found much to attract me to this office representing the southeastern corner of the Grand Canyon state, including having two former fellows on the permanent staff and fantastic geology throughout the district and the surrounding area (I did field research for my Ph.D. thesis just south of the border in the Cananea district of Sonora, Mexico). In addition, the Congresswoman serves on the House Science and Technology Committee with subcommittees on Technology and Innovation, Energy and Environment, and Research and Science Education. All of these are areas where my background as a geologist, research scientist, and science educator can be utilized.

I started working in Congresswoman Giffords' office at the end of September and experienced the last few days of the legislative session before Congress adjourned. The really “interesting times” began as the campaign season heated up for the November elections, which brought about dramatic changes in the American political landscape. In the Senate, six seats switched parties, and in the House there was a net gain of 63 Republican seats, which is more than the 54 seat swing of the “Republican Revolution” in 1994. To put the 2010 election in perspective, this was the largest such gain for a single party since 1948, and the highest of any midterm election since 1938—interesting times indeed!

Although the results of the 2010 midterm elections will be analyzed and debated for years to come, there are some immediate effects that will impact both the legislative process and my fellowship experience, particularly in the House of Representatives, where the majority party controls almost everything, ranging from the rules of procedure to the size (and in some cases, existence) of individual committees. For example, one of the committees that I had interviewed with, the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, has been abolished.

Beyond the politics of which party controls the Congressional agenda, the elections also illustrated an undercurrent—that the role of science is declining in American political discourse. This should be of concern to all scientists. Admittedly, part of this is a longstanding American tradition of skepticism of “experts,” as commented upon since at least the time of Mark Twain, who wrote, “There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact.” But coupled with legitimate concerns about how to accurately measure and interpret complex data, such as in the field of climate change study, even normal anti-expert feelings can transform into a general distrust of science and scientists. One of the more disturbing statements that I have heard more than a few times in the past several months is that “scientists (and by implication, science) are just another interest group”; i.e., everybody is entitled to an



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opinion and science is just another opinion. As scientists, we have to do a better job of telling our story, and as a Congressional Science Fellow, I will do my best to help educate about the scientific process.

This anti-science phenomenon also has appeared in the budget-cutting arena and has moved beyond the episodic historical trend of trimming the budgets of federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) to include non-peer review evaluation of the worth of specific scientific investigations. For example, the official House of Representatives website of the Majority Leader for the 112th Congress (<http://republicanwhip.house.gov/YouCut/Review.htm>) includes a link to the NSF database and invites citizens to submit specific grant numbers that they believe are wasteful. Of course, disputes about how to properly fund science are not new (in this case, dating back to the founding of the NSF in 1950), nor are attacks on wasteful scientific funding restricted to any particular political party, as illustrated by the famous "Golden Fleece awards" started by the late Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.) in 1975. But there is an important distinction to be made between appropriate citizen concern about spending and the integrity of the peer review process, which is the basis of most modern science and publication. With the convening of the 112th Congress in January, the interesting times continue, and I look forward to reporting on developments in a future column.

This manuscript is submitted for publication by Larry Meinert, 2010–2011 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, with the understanding that the U.S. government is authorized to reproduce and distribute reprints for governmental use. The one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and by the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award no. G10AP00128. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government. Meinert is working in the office of Representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) and can be reached at larry.meinert@mail.house.gov.

Editor's note: This report was written before the tragic shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and others on 8 January 2011. Larry Meinert was not in Tucson at the time; he continues his work in Giffords' Washington D.C. office, where members of her staff continue to carry out the functions of the office.

Shortly after the shooting, GSA posted the following statement at the top of its Web page, including a personal note from GSA President Joaquin Ruiz:

GSA is shocked and saddened by the recent violence against U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) and her staff and constituents. Giffords' office is host to the 2010–2011 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, Larry Meinert. "Representative Giffords has been an enlightened supporter of higher education and science," said GSA President Joaquin Ruiz. "I have known her for many years and have always been impressed by her commitment to our country and her humanity." GSA, along with all of Giffords' friends and colleagues in the geoscience community, wish her and everyone affected by this event a fast and complete recovery. Our condolences extend to the families of the victims of this senseless act.

2011 GSA Section Meeting Mentor Programs

STUDENTS—Meet Your Career Mentors!



Roy J. Shlemon Mentor Program in Applied Geoscience. Sponsored by the GSA Foundation.

This is a chance for students to discuss career opportunities and challenges with professional geoscientists from multiple disciplines.

Students will receive FREE lunch tickets in their registration packets to attend this program.

The John Mann Mentors in Applied Hydrogeology Program. Sponsored by the GSA Foundation.

This event presents opportunities for students interested in applied hydrogeology or hydrology as a career to interact and network with practicing hydrogeologic professionals. This program is a focused, small-scale event that features a FREE lunch. Students will receive tickets to attend in their registration packets.

Space for these events is limited, so plan to arrive early: first come, first served.

Questions? Contact jnocerino@geosociety.org.

NORTHEASTERN/NORTH-CENTRAL

JOINT SECTION MEETING

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Shlemon Mentor Luncheons

Sun., 20 March, and Mon., 21 March, noon–1:30 p.m.

Mann Mentors in Applied Hydrogeology Luncheon

Tues., 22 March, noon–1:30 p.m.

SOUTHEASTERN SECTION MEETING

Wilmington, North Carolina, USA

Shlemon Mentor Luncheon

Thurs., 24 March, noon–1:30 p.m.

Mann Mentors in Applied Hydrogeology Luncheon

Fri., 25 March, noon–1:30 p.m.

SOUTH-CENTRAL SECTION MEETING

New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

Shlemon Mentor Luncheon

Mon., 28 March

Mann Mentors in Applied Hydrogeology Luncheon

Tues., 29 March

ROCKY MOUNTAIN/CORDILLERAN

JOINT SECTION MEETING

Logan, Utah, USA

Shlemon Mentor Luncheon

Wed., 18 May, 11:45 a.m.–1:15 p.m.

Mann Mentors in Applied Hydrogeology Luncheon

Thurs., 19 May, 11:45 a.m.–1:15 p.m.