

Working With Congress: A Practical Guide for Scientists and Engineers

William G. Wells Jr
AAAS P., Washington, D. C.,
1992. 153 pp. \$12.95 pb
ISBN 0-87168-504-3

Working with Congress is a thoughtful, well-constructed primer on communication. The need for such a primer results from the difference between the realms of science and politics. That difference is illustrated by an oft-quoted remark from a Congressional staff member: "On Capitol Hill facts are negotiable." The book was sponsored by the Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology and Government to encourage scientists to increase their interaction with the legislative branch. Both the Carnegie Commission and author William Wells contend that such increased activity would benefit the public, the Congress and science itself, because of the dependence of scientists on public support and the need of policy makers for technical advice. Wells believes that scientists who lament the level of understanding of science among members of Congress should first seek a remedy by trying to understand the politicians as masters of their own very difficult craft.

The book includes chapters of elementary civics combined with useful observations on the ways of Capitol Hill by historians and professional observers of Congress. Scattered throughout are quotations from members of Congress exhorting scientists in various ways to keep in touch but also to be clear, brief and direct. There is a glossary with terms ranging from the obscure ("engrossed bill") to the obvious ("committee"). And most valuable are the 40 pages laying out 17 "cardinal rules" for working with Congress, 19 points to keep in mind for scheduled meetings, 7 points to remember about visits to Congressional district offices and so on. The points are very simply stated, such as: "Show some knowledge about your audience." "Understand the need for compromise." "Use examples rather than generalities." "Thank your friends publicly." So simple are the messages that the reader may begin thinking the book is unnecessary. But the comments from Congressional members and staff show otherwise. Evidently

scientists in the heady, foreign atmosphere of Capitol Hill routinely ignore elementary lessons.

Wells served as staff director of Congressional subcommittees and head of the Office of Public Sector Programs of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He bases his advice on personal observation and, more importantly, on written and spoken comments from members of Congress and their staff. The comments are telling: "[The sci-

entists] were with me for 20 minutes," said one senator, "and when they left I still had no idea why they had come." "Can you believe this person didn't know which party my boss belongs to?" exclaimed a staffer. "It was a good set of suggestions, but we'd already reported the bill out of committee two days ago." "[On Capitol Hill] scientists are just another constituency, . . . [and yet they seem to think] that a Member will vote against one of his or her constituents

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if only you will give them the correct facts." "Support for science should be presented in terms of helping to meet national needs, not as an entitlement owed to scientists."

Why do scientists often shy away from Congressional contact and cede that territory to those they envision with expensive neckties, alligator-skin shoes and little regard for scientific facts? Wells does not directly address that question. It may be that scientists, trained to see results as parts of a series slowly converging toward the truth, are uncomfortable providing the definite choice needed for a vote tomorrow. It may be that a two-minute briefing without the qualifications, or statements of methodological limitations seems dishonest to a scientist. What will lead scientists to venture into the realm where, for the sake of their country and their own discipline, they should go, but where facts seem negotiable and constituents seem more important than facts? This book will not provide the answer to the question or the motivation for a scientist to follow that path. But if a scientist should find herself or himself in that realm, through circumstance or committee summons, Wells provides a very useful guidebook.

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