

**Capitol Offense**  
**8 Reasons Why Congress Offers the Worst Job in America**  
**by Pete Kotz**  
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Imagine, in a moment of suspended disbelief, that your job pays \$174,000 a year. And comes with a \$1.3 million expense account. And a staff of eighteen [Ivy League](#) yes men whose sole duty is to bray loud and wide about the miracle that is you — when they're not babysitting your kids or fetching your dry cleaning, that is.

You get free travel to anywhere on the globe. A private dining room and a private gym replete with swimming pool, sauna and steam bath.

Best of all, you're only required to show up for the equivalent of four months per year.

Former congressman [Tom Tancredo](#) had this life for a decade. By the time it was over, he'd caught that affliction known to anyone who hates his job: a fear of Monday mornings. "As I drove to work, I'd get a knot in my stomach, and it would just start to grow," Tancredo says.

Here's why:

**8. Think of your day as a [Bataan Death March](#) of meetings.**

The meeting. It's the most nefarious act in the American workplace, an assault of trudging monologues and plans never to be fulfilled.

Yet this is your life as a legislator. Meeting. After meeting. After meeting.

Your mornings begin with committee hearings. But because most members serve on four to seven different committees, "you can't just go to one hearing and sit," says former Republican representative [Steve Bartlett](#) of Texas.

After all, the line outside your office began forming at 8 a.m. There are staffers, constituents and captains of industry all wanting...meetings. Never mind the 12,000 registered lobbyists, who may suddenly lack the stamina to write a check if they can't get a sit-down.

So you knock them out in breakneck succession, with barely time to lob pleasantries and get down to business. "Everything in a congressman's life is scheduled within fifteen-minute increments, and oftentimes you're double-booked," says Bartlett, who subsequently became mayor of Dallas before heading a [Wall Street](#) advocacy group.

Tancredo's day would usually begin at 6 a.m., lest his commute turn into a grinding two-hour pilgrimage, courtesy of the D.C. rush hour. His meetings would run for the next ten hours. If the Colorado Republican wanted to speak on [the House](#) floor, he would still be working at 11 p.m., when a slot finally opened on the schedule.

Yes, it could all be a heady experience. "Powerful people beg for your vote," says one Capitol Hill staffer. "Ego-wise, it's an orgy at the [Playboy Mansion](#)."

It can also be enriching. Tancredo warmly recalls the deluge of information available nowhere else. "Every day you learned more shit about more shit," he says. "It was like a college education every couple of weeks."

The downside is that all this activity is usually for naught.

After all, this is a job of rigorous self-interest. Passing meaningful legislation only jeopardizes your survival. It places your vote on a tee, there to be hammered by character-assassinating ads in the next election. So rather than act today, it's always best to speak of intended heroics in distant battles to come.

That means the most common vote you'll take is to rename a post office somewhere, which amounts to 20 percent of all legislation passed. According to former Republican senator [Alan Simpson](#) of [Wyoming](#), it's

now all about running out the clock. "It's simply: How do you stall until you get through the next election so you don't lose seats?"

## **7. You will attend many parties. They will blow.**

Washington is a party town. Bartlett often went to four a night, twelve months a year.

Yet D.C.'s definition of "partying" hews closer to the 1870s sense of the word. You will not lose yourself on the dance floor. You will not wolf shots of pomegranate vodka and end up sharing a bong with a ventriloquist named Renaldo at 4 a.m.

What you will do is schmooze and be schmoozed at dinners, receptions and fundraisers, where the most unrefined moment will involve a woman wearing pastel out of season.

"The typical reception was about a fifteen-minute in-and-out," Bartlett says. "Most bartenders would prepare 'the congressional drink' — which is usually orange juice — as soon as you come in."

Yes, there's a good chance that someone will buy you a steak the size of a sub-Saharan principality. But there's also a good chance that you'll be seated next to a lobbyist for the [American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity](#), who will treat you to a soliloquy on the respiratory benefits of airborne toxins.

"They're not a respite," says Tancredo, who's now running for governor of Colorado. "They're usually with contributors to the party, and you're supposed to schmooze. They're not always comfortable."

Worse, these events have a way of trampling lesser egos.

Washington is often referred to as "Hollywood for ugly people." But because there are 535 members of Congress, only the most prominent get the all-hands-on-deck obsequiousness reserved for Brangelina and

Clooney. If you're a freshman from Minnesota or a back-bencher from Missouri, expect to play the role of [Tori Spelling](#).

[Connie Schultz](#) knows the drill. She's the author of *...and His Lovely Wife*, a memoir of campaigning with her husband, [Senator Sherrod Brown](#), a Democrat from Ohio. Though she may be a [Pulitzer Prize-winning](#) syndicated columnist, she's well acquainted with what's known as the "D.C. scalp stare" — the practice of looking over the head of the person with whom you're speaking, preparing to leap at first sight of someone more important entering your field of vision.

"People are always looking over your shoulder as you're talking to them to see who else is coming in," she says. "It's ambitious, and it can be so impersonal."

## **6. Wasn't I supposed to get 252 days off this year?**

Technically, you were. The U.S. House is only scheduled to meet 113 days this year, making this the easiest job since the invention of trophy wives. But most members believe that if they're not in constant demand, "they're slipping into obscurity," says one staffer.

So they're off to the airport every Thursday night, flying home to a new schedule of parades, manufacturing tours, town-hall events and meetings. Always more meetings.

Fridays and Saturdays are spent touring the state, playing the resident dignitary at Eagle Scout ceremonies and attending business openings. It's a grueling schedule, especially if you represent a more populous state. Brown, for example, must answer the needs of 11 million people. "You have a lot of people who want your time," says Schultz.

Nor does the workweek finally end when the clock ticks five on Saturday evening. "It is a 24/7 job," says former Republican senator [Kay Bailey Hutchison](#) of Texas. "You're always on call for the emergencies that occur. There are people who are trapped on the top of mountains. There are

people who are taken hostage. It could be Sunday. It could be Saturday at 2 a.m."

Someone, somewhere will want you to immediately mobilize the government.

And they'll still be calling you a lazy swine two weeks from now.

## **5. You will beg treasure from complete strangers.**

This is what Washingtonians euphemistically call "strategic outreach."

A leaked [PowerPoint](#) presentation from the [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee](#) shows the party urging incoming freshmen to spend at least four hours per day soliciting money. Because it's considered gauche — and likely illegal — to mooch contributors from the office, this means slipping away to party headquarters, where your dialing finger develops calluses worthy of an Indonesian call center.

Yet dial you must. This job is a purely capitalist pursuit. He who stockpiles the most loot wins 91 percent of the time. And raising money for the party directly correlates to the prestige of your committee assignments. Beg with insufficient zeal, and you'll find yourself chairing the [Subcommittee on Gardening and Lawn Care Products](#).

Democratic senator [Dennis DeConcini](#) spent eighteen years representing Arizona before becoming a lobbyist. Whenever election time neared, his treasurer would "give me a list of people to call, with the names of their wives and where their kids went to college. And that's what I did all weekend — call people," he says.

"You're having to ask people all the time to fund your career," adds Schultz. "What other profession is like that?"

This may explain the devolving reputation of Congress, whose approval rating now flutters at just 13 percent. You have to be deeply committed to

the cause — or equally willing to debase yourself — to even consider this job.

Asks Democrat [Bob Graham](#), a former senator and governor from Florida: "How many people would feel comfortable being handed 100 telephone numbers of people you don't know and calling them up and asking them for \$1,000?"

#### **4. You probably suck at parenting.**

The crushing schedule leaves you primed for charges of familial abandonment. Most legislators get just one day a week with the spouse and kids.

When people ask Tancredo if they should run for office, he answers with a simple question: "I say, 'Well, do you like your family?'"

He relates the tale of a fellow congressman, a father of five whose work left little time for home. One day the man's five-year-old found a videotape of Dad speaking and plugged it into the VCR. The boy's younger brother had seen so little of his father that he tried to hug his image on TV.

[Connie Morella](#) had it easier than most — if it's possible to describe a mother of nine's life as "easy." When her sister died of cancer, the Republican congresswoman and her husband — who already had three children — adopted her sister's six kids. But at least she represented nearby [Maryland](#).

She recalls hustling to PTA meetings and back-to-school nights, where her kids were forced to compete with constituents for her attention. It left her with a lingering sense of guilt. "Oh, yes," she says. "Children had to sacrifice to be in political families."

Much worse is the ache in parents who represent distant states. In the old days, legislators could keep their families intact by moving them to D.C. But

as disgust for Congress grew, so began an arms race to demonstrate who could be less Washington than the next guy.

Think of it as a weird form of one-upmanship for people with deficit self-awareness. If you're a member of Congress, after all, *you're the very embodiment of Washington*.

Still, most now boast of keeping their families back home. Others make public spectacles of sleeping in their offices. *Look! I'm so not D.C., I don't even have an electric bill here!*

"Members will get criticized if they move their families to Washington, because they'll be seen as out of touch with the district," says [Martin Frost](#), a former Democratic congressman from Texas. Occupationally speaking, this can be a lethal accusation.

Take Republican [Richard Lugar](#), who arrived in the Senate from Indiana in 1977. At the time, it was standard practice to move to D.C. Over the next 36 years, Lugar became one of the more eminent members of Congress. Until the last election, that is, when it was revealed that he'd sold his Indianapolis home three decades earlier.

The senator was soon attacked with headlines like this one, from the *Daily Caller*: "Richard Lugar doesn't live here anymore." His stock plunged so far that he was beat in the [GOP](#) primary by a guy who believes pregnancy from rape is "something God intended to happen."

### **3. You're only one slip away from national ridicule.**

The wonderful thing about being a normal human being: Your every misstep is pleasantly shrouded by your own obscurity. Not so in Congress.

"These people are running from appearance to appearance, and everything they do has the potential for catastrophe," notes one staffer. "All they have to do is slip off a stage or have a mic catch them in a swear word."

And when that happens, enemy yes men will be lying in wait, ready to denounce your very soul with prefabricated acrimony and grave demands for apologies.

"We're perched on the ledge, hoping and hoping they'll say something outrageous," says the staffer. "And then it's like, 'Yes!' But then we have to pretend we're outraged. It's theater."

Every conversation, no matter how small, brings the possibility of nationwide derision, YouTube infamy and a featured spot in late-night monologues.

"You think you're sitting there talking frankly, and somebody's taping you on their cell phone," says Alan Simpson. "And all they're waiting for is a gaffe. You're being followed all day — not for the purpose of what you're saying, but for that stupid little statement you make when you haven't slept but three hours the night before."

Even a trip to the store is cause for caution. Morella recalls thinking twice before she ever stepped out the door: "I would be careful, even when I went to the market, about what I was wearing. I had people contact me who didn't like my hair or my earrings. I had people say I was seen shopping for dresses in the sale aisle."

## **2. You will be seventeen again — and not in a good way.**

Politicians like to describe their profession as "war." It conjures a portrait of courage, gallantry and hand-to-hand combat — preferably featuring nicely oiled pectoral muscles. Which means it's a wholly unsuitable metaphor. When you fight by insulting people on TV, you're more [Joan Rivers](#) than [George Patton](#).

After all, the dignified statesman does not stoop to fisticuffs. This is seen as inelegant — not to mention scary. So you assault your foes with innuendo, misinformation, rumor and, of course, [Photoshop](#).



In other words, it's just like high school.

In the last election, the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) presumably hired the cast of *Mean Girls* to attack Sherrod Brown. In one ad, his photo was doctored with a five-o'clock shadow to make him look as if he'd just returned from a three-week bender while living under a bridge. *Sherrod Brown: He doesn't even bathe.*

Rumor works just as well, as [West Virginia](#) officials learned during the recent sign-up for [Obamacare](#). Some residents resisted, having heard that it required the implanting of a chip in their bodies. This, apparently, was a deal-breaker.

You can even count on being undermined by your own party. Tancredo recalls the incessant pressure from leadership to toe the Republican line. On this job, independence is one of the graver sins, certain to leave lasting stains on your permanent record.

"The most serious threats they could muster is that you were going to ruin your career in this place," he says. "People there, that's the most enticing thing to them. I'd tell him, 'I don't want a career in this place. I don't even like this place.'"

Then there's the case of [Congressman Vance McAllister](#), a Republican from Louisiana. Last month, he was working late in his district office. This afforded him the opportunity to engage in a brief but festive make-out session with aide [Melissa Peacock](#).

Problem No. 1: McAllister had appeared in campaign commercials with his wife and five children, promising to "defend our Christian way of life." (Most likely by renaming post offices after biblical greats.)

Problem No. 2: Ms. Peacock was married to someone other than Vance McAllister.

Problem No. 3: McAllister's amorous lip wrestling was caught on security tape. And leaked to a newspaper. Allegedly by someone on his own staff.

This Judas environment is to be expected. When an entire enterprise is built on avoiding accomplishment, backstabbing and palace intrigue become the sport of the realm.

DeConcini recently visited a Republican friend in Congress. "He told me how terrible it was," he says. "He said it was just awful, even in his own caucus. There's a *gotcha* feeling."

He then visited with a liberal Democrat. "He told me the same thing about the Democrats: 'I gotta have my way, and I gotta show that I'm tough,'" he says.

But since everyone in Washington is busy being so *not* Washington, the toxicity of the job is always someone else's fault. Yes, crowing about "personal responsibility" plays before the cameras — yet only amateurs dare practice it.

"Even members of Congress hate Congress," says an aide. "It's just that they each believe themselves to be the exception to the rule. Congress is not a team with a collective identity. It's a collection of individuals guided almost exclusively by ruthless self-interest."

### **1. The least among you will get the most attention.**

In one sense, "Congress is a microcosm of the country," says former representative Bartlett. "There's going to be 15 to 20 percent who do nothing, 15 to 20 percent who do everything and the rest in between."

The problem is that those who do nothing are celebrated the most.

To be a fixture of the greenroom requires special bombast. You'll need tales of villainy. High-decibel outrage. A prevailing sense of victimhood. If you can't do it with a straight face, forget about making [Sean Hannity](#)'s guest list.

The same skills apply to courting donors. "One of the ways you raise money is by appearing to be very adamant and unforgiving," says Bob Graham.

"The more strident you are, the more likely you are to be successful in the financial returns."

Yet ceaseless shrieking, as you may have guessed, can make you deeply unpopular with colleagues. They may name a post office after your ex-wife.

"A successful member of Congress is not going to talk like [Rush Limbaugh](#), blasting away," says Bartlett. "There are some members who do, but they're not going to be successful. If you're attacking all the time, maybe you incite the crowd, but not many members are going to vote with you."

Yet, as Tancredo tells it, a good chunk of Congress is perfectly happy being hostile to success — as long as they can moonlight as TV pundits. You still get the private sauna, the small army of supplicants and the powerful people gathering outside your door, waiting to bathe you in flattery and tribute.

"That was the most aggravating thing, looking around and seeing so many people who just wanted to be in Congress," Tancredo says. "You got your paycheck. You got your perks. What the hell? It's better than driving a cab."