

Army-Congress Relations

A View From the Hill

Senator Jack Reed

FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS I have served in Congress, six years as a member of the House of Representatives and the past two as a senator. Recently, I joined the Senate Armed Services Committee, but well before my appointment to the committee, I was called upon, like every member of Congress, to cast votes that have significant impact on foreign policy and military programs and budgets.

When I am asked to cast a vote that would affect Army policy or programs, I look to several sources for guidance. I review the knowledge and experience I gained as a cadet at the US Military Academy, West Point, New York, and as a company commander in the 82d Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I think about the troops I have visited in Haiti, Korea and Bosnia. I may recall a conversation about an issue that I had with a flag officer who stopped in to see me for no other reason than to chat. I think about discussions I had with uniformed and civilian Army personnel at a reception or promotion ceremony or an Army football game. I may call an official at the Pentagon with whom I have established a relationship and who I know will enthusiastically take my call and speak frankly with me about a program. I read the memo prepared by my staff, which I assume has been thoroughly briefed by

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the Army on the issue, and I consider the staff recommendation on the vote. Then, I am ready to make my decision.

Ideally, the relationship between all members of Congress and the Army would be similar to my own. However, only a handful of the members of Congress have such resources available to them. This fact is the challenge facing the Army in its congressional relations. Every member of Congress should have a fundamental understanding of Army programs, should see the Army in action, should feel comfortable and welcome at Army events and should have a working relationship with senior Army officials—both uniformed and civilian. While ultimately each member of Congress decides the extent of his or her relationship with the Army, the Army must take the initiative.

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I think the Army hesitates to arrange orientation trips because there are no alluring aircraft carriers or fighter jets to offer. But the Army has possibly one of the greatest assets of any service—soldiers. In my experience, most members of Congress are not as impressed by hardware as they are by simply talking with dedicated, disciplined soldiers and watching them in action.

Hill is antithetical to the Army's culture. Many senior officers likely think that if the Army is to live up to the motto of "duty, honor, country," it must take directions from its leaders, not give directions. The Army must wait to be called, not do the calling. As Samuel Huntington noted in *The Soldier and the State*, "the Army developed an image of itself as the government's obedient handyman performing without question or hesitation the jobs assigned to it."^{*} For the most part, communication between the Army and Congress is one-way.

The Army must consider two-way communication with Capitol Hill an essential mission. An active relationship with Congress is a key to the Army's success. Every member of Congress will cast several votes each year determining where soldiers are deployed and what equipment they will use. If those who cast the votes do not know about the Army or its programs, they may make wrong decisions. If the Army does not receive the needed authorization and funding, its ability to perform its missions and serve the country is compromised.

A prominent Army presence on Capitol Hill is vital because Congress's knowledge of the military is increasingly limited. Currently, less than one-half of the Senate has served in the military. In addition, younger members of the House and Senate have had minimal contact with the military. They did not grow up in an era when a member of every family was contributing to national defense in some way. To these men and women, military policies and programs may seem foreign and incomprehensible. But these members of Congress realize the importance of maintaining our national defense and want to support the troops who defend our country every day. The more opportunities the Army offers these members to learn about the Army, the better prepared they will be to make decisions that benefit the Army and the country.

Many members of Congress, of course, have served in the military. Of these veterans, however,

only 20 senators served in the Army. While these veterans have knowledge of and are comfortable with military programs and policies, they naturally maintain an allegiance to the branch in which they served. The Army needs to ensure that these members are well versed in Army programs and the Army's role in accomplishing a mission involving other services.

The foundation of the Army's relationship with Congress should be a strong bond with the Army's natural allies. Those members who served in the Army, like myself, will most likely be willing to learn about and support Army policies and programs. However, other Army veterans in Congress may find themselves in a position similar to my own—representing a state dominated by the Navy—so the Army cannot rely on these members solely as their core constituency.

The Army must also reach out to members who represent states in which the Army has a presence. The Pentagon should maintain regular contact with these members, keeping them apprised of events in their states—from ceremonies to construction projects to environmental cleanup efforts. Members of Congress do not like surprises, especially those that occur in their backyard. Advance notice and comprehensive briefings are invaluable in maintaining a strong, positive relationship between Congress and the military. In addition, the officers assigned to an Army installation in a state should also establish a relationship with the appropriate representatives and senators. For example, I have always had excellent relationships with the presidents of the Naval War College and the commanders of the Naval Undersea Warfare Center in Rhode Island. While these men have enormous obligations carrying out day-to-day operations, we speak on a regular basis, whether or not there is a crisis. As a result, I am knowledgeable about Navy activities in Rhode Island and am always aware of the Navy's needs when I make decisions.

While it is essential to establish strong relationships with a core constituency, the Army must also reach out to the remaining offices. One simple way

^{*}Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957), 261.

To increase understanding of the Army on Capitol Hill, the Army needs to spend time and energy establishing relationships with as many members of Congress as possible. The Army should not be on the Hill only when it needs something, for then it can be too late. Senior flag officers inherently have the respect and attention of every member of Congress and therefore should attempt to meet with members often throughout the year to discuss Army issues. Then, when the Army has a crisis, members will understand the issue and be willing to listen. Furthermore, if a member of Congress feels he or she has a relationship with the Army, he or she is more likely to call and ask for advice or clarification on a program or policy before voting on an issue.

to create good will with every office on Capitol Hill is by processing casework promptly, thoroughly and enthusiastically. Every office receives letters and calls from constituents who have questions about or problems with the Army. Responding to constituents is the top priority in every office, so if the Army enables the congressional staff to satisfy the constituent, that office will think highly of the Army.

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The Army must also establish a relationship with congressional staff members. Because of busy schedules, members of Congress cannot possibly spend the time needed to learn about every subject. They therefore rely on briefings and advice from personal and professional staff. If the Army is to be successful in promoting its programs and policies on the Hill, it is paramount that staffers are fully briefed. A relationship with staffers can help them better prepare a member to make decisions about an Army program and can be an investment for the Army if the staff is promoted or moves to another office.

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knows that the Navy needs submarines and aircraft carriers and the Air Force needs new fighter jets. However, even those well versed in military affairs might find it difficult to name the top three Army programs. The Army might consider promoting programs in conjunction with the contractors who build the system. The Army should be teamed with those who are very experienced in making professional presentations, and the contractors would most likely appreciate the service support. I will turn again to the Navy for an example of this teaming—the Navy, the Electric Boat company and Newport News have a vested interest in submarine procurement. Working together, they present a sophisticated and persuasive argument that has been instrumental in ensuring funding for submarines over the years.

Although most members of Congress and their staffs will make time to be briefed on Army programs, there is no substitute for actually taking a trip to the field. I think the Army hesitates to arrange orientation trips because there are no alluring aircraft carriers or fighter jets to offer. But the Army has possibly one of the greatest assets of any service—soldiers. In my experience, most members of Congress are not as impressed by hardware as they are by simply talking with dedicated, disciplined soldiers and watching them in action. Whether it involves a trip a few hours ride from Washington or across the globe, the Army should encourage members of Congress to visit the troops and learn firsthand about the fine job they do every day.

The United States Army is the finest army in the world. It has every reason to be proud of its accomplishments and its goals. The US Congress is aware of the Army's record and wants and needs to know how to ensure that the Army may best accomplish its mission. Constant contact and communication will tremendously advance the relationship between Congress and the Army. **MR**

The Honorable Jack Reed was sworn in as Rhode Island's 47th US Senator on 7 January 1997. He received a B.S. from the US Military Academy, an M.A. from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and a J.D. from Harvard Law School. As a former Army ranger, he served as a company commander and battalion staff officer in the 82d Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and returned to West Point as an associate professor in the Department of Social Sciences. He served on the House Select Intelligence Committee and has traveled to Haiti, Somalia and the former Yugoslavia to evaluate US peacekeeping missions.