Opening of 112th Congress Marred by Arizona Shooting

The 112th Congress opened its first session on January 3 with the traditional fanfare that marks a transition in power. But Speaker John Boehner’s (R-OH) celebration of his first week in his new job was curtailed first by several political controversies and then abruptly cut off by the tragic shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) and several others at a public event in Tucson, Arizona.

As a point of personal privilege, my thoughts (along with those of all of us here at the AAG) go out to each of the victims and their families. As someone who has worked in the political sphere for over a decade now, I have sometimes stopped to ponder the evil that exists in the world and the dangers posed by a life lived in and around public service. But there are many good people who work vigilantly to protect Congress and other federal officials and facilities – and events like the tragedy in Arizona are thankfully rare.

Congresswoman Giffords’ shooting was especially jarring to those of us in the science advocacy community. She is an active member of the House Science Committee and has been a leader on NASA issues. Giffords’ husband, Mark Kelly, is a veteran astronaut and was scheduled to command the space shuttle *Endeavour* on its final flight in April. We are hopeful for her successful and speedy recovery.

The shooting caused Congress to pause for a week, but not before Speaker Boehner and his caucus were quickly exposed to the political pitfalls of being in the majority. As one example, the House was faced with an administrative headache after it was learned that Reps. Pete Sessions (R-TX) and Mike Fitzpatrick (R-PA) had missed the official swearing in of all members because they were off the House floor at a reception. Not being aware of House rules, Sessions and Fitzpatrick voted on several procedural motions before they were properly sworn in by Boehner the following day.

GOP Budget Proposals Could Harm Geography Research

The Speaker and his GOP colleagues have also faced increasing questions as to whether they will be able to cut $100 billion from the federal budget, as was promised in the *Pledge to America* issued during the 2010 campaign. Republican spokesmen have indicated that the House intends to follow through on the promise this year, and that their goal is to return most federal accounts to their Fiscal Year 2008 (pre-Stimulus) spending levels. But critics have pointed out that following through on the promise would require draconian cuts to several popular education programs and critical grants to states and localities at a time when governments at all levels are struggling to balance their budgets.

It is this promise of budget cuts that could have the biggest negative impact on the geography community. The National Science Foundation, for example, would lose more than 12 percent of its current funding if its budget was returned to the 2008 level. And the National Endowment for the Humanities would face a cut of over 15 percent of its funding with a return to the 2008 number. While Senate Democrats and the White House are unlikely to support such extreme budget cuts, House Republicans will likely insist on reductions to some extent.

New House Education Chair Yet to Schedule K-12 Hearings

Meanwhile, in another policy topic of great importance to geography and the AAG, Rep. John Kline (R-MN) formally became chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce as the new session of Congress opened. Like most of his colleagues, Kline set aside political discussions during the week of January 10, but even before the shooting, the new chairman had said little about K-12 policy.

A consensus exists in Washington that, despite the new divided government, Congress will make a serious effort to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), better known as No Child Left Behind, in 2011. For that to happen, however, Kline will have to play a key role in getting legislation through his Committee and the full House and in forging a compromise with Senate Democrats and the Administration.

Kline’s first legislative activity as the new chairman was to issue a press release trumpeting the bill House Republicans have introduced that would repeal the 2010 healthcare reform legislation. Education and the Workforce is one of three House committees with primary jurisdiction over healthcare policy, hence Kline’s interest in the issue.

As of January 10, Kline had yet to schedule any hearings on education topics. On behalf of the AAG, I reached out to his staff to welcome them to their new positions and to explain the importance of including dedicated funding authorizations for K-12 geography education as part of the ESEA. They expressed an interest in meeting with us once they have had a chance to settle in to their new roles, and one of Kline’s spokespersons told me, “The Education and the Workforce Committee will engage all of its members in the process of evaluating the current law and identifying areas in need of reform. Chairman Kline has indicated his openness to a variety of approaches for reforming the law. Congress may consider addressing specific concerns or opportunities for improving the law, rather than a massive overhaul.”

We will continue to work with key leaders in Congress to insure that K-12 geography education gets the attention it deserves in the ESEA. We are grateful for the support the AAG membership has provided in this endeavor.

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