



For Harry Mitchell, the top is the Floor

Four months into the job, Mitchell settles into life on the Hill

by Matt Stone
published on Wednesday, April 11, 2007

For Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., voting on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives is a front-row seat to the subject he taught for 28 years.

"I really enjoy going down there and sitting on the floor and doing what people in the gallery are doing, observing," he said. "It's the only time you really get all the members together."

The 66-year-old Mitchell is Arizona's new 5th congressional district representative, where he juggles the concerns of a district, country and never-ending campaign.

The fifth district contains ASU's Tempe Campus, stretching from Ahwatukee past Scottsdale to Fountain Hills.

Mitchell graduated from ASU in 1962, and taught government at Tempe High School, served in the Tempe City Council, the Arizona State Legislature and as mayor of Tempe.

And after a stint as chairman of the Arizona Democratic Party, Mitchell made it to congress - where he is paid \$165,200, a far cry from what Mitchell said was his first teaching salary of less than \$10,000.

'That's what congress is all about'

Mitchell's day starts with a drive by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial and the Washington Monument in the distance.

Mitchell's office is in the Rayburn Building, one of three house office buildings. The other two house buildings on the hill are Cannon and Longworth.

The view from his office includes a nearby railroad, which has special significance to Mitchell because his father was a railroader.

Along with the view, many things make Mitchell appreciate his surroundings, he said.

"When I happen to see somebody who's really a big newsmaker," he said. "When I'm at different parts of this campus ... when I go outside and see the dome.

"It's exciting."

Mitchell is the only freshman representative in Rayburn, as it's typically reserved for more tenured members, offering slightly larger offices.

With the results of the November election dragging on longer than usual, Mitchell took J.D. Hayworth's old office, the Republican who had previously represented the district for 12 years.

Near the doors to Mitchell's office is an American flag, the same as other representatives, but it's accompanied by an ASU flag on the other side.

"Obviously ASU is a very important constituent," Mitchell said.

Inside his office, while the staff has yet to get a chance to fully decorate it, most of the items are ASU maroon and gold.

Mitchell's office is divided into three main rooms and all are often simultaneously busy with a meeting or activity.

In his personal office, pictures of his grandchildren sit on his desk, while two glass cases behind his chair sit almost empty, only a football and soccer ball resting in each.

It was appropriations week on Capitol Hill from March 12 to 16 and the building was full of lobbyists and constituents looking for federal funding.

As soon as Mitchell walked in the door, he met with the mayor of Chandler, and shortly after the mayor of Scottsdale - both there to pitch the congressman on spending projects.

Over the course of the day, Mitchell met with more people to discuss similar issues and his staff did the same, talking to everyone from firefighters to florists.

"I think that's what congress is about - we're representing people," Mitchell said. "I enjoy talking to them, finding out what's on their mind, why they're here."

Meet the staff

The Washington staff of seven, plus two interns, is vital to keeping him informed, Mitchell said.

"I rely on them heavily for background information and for all the potential pitfalls - the pros and cons - and we argue a lot," he said. "It helps me clarify my position when they play the devil's advocate."

And while they might disagree in part with the congressman from time to time, the staff supports him, said Seth Scott, Mitchell's press secretary.

"I think there's healthy debate inside the office," he said. "But at the end of the day, he makes the decisions, and his staff backs him up."

Scott, a 2002 graduate of ASU, said he started working for Mitchell at the start of his campaign in early April 2006.

"That was at a time when no one was really giving him a fighting chance, but I think people who worked for him knew different," he said.

Most of the staff works together in the same room, desks squeezed together and paper covering every inch.

Gene Fisher, Mitchell's chief of staff, put the staff together, though some were brought from the district.

One staffer from outside the district is Matthew Weisman, Mitchell's legislative director.

Along with a never-ending flow of mail to go through, that on at least one occasion tumbled out of its box onto the head of a staffer, Weisman said he tracks legislation on the floor and in committees.

While Mitchell sits in subcommittees, Weisman is often at the side of the room, occasionally creeping behind the chairs to whisper in his ear.

"I absolutely enjoy it immensely," he said. "But there are not enough hours in the day."

The whole legislative process is an honor to be a part of, Weisman said, even though he estimates he works about 90 hours a week.

Chris Quigley, Mitchell's legislative assistant, said she expected the hours, but not everything else that came with the job.

"I expected the busy office, I expected the deadlines, I expected the hours," she said. "I guess I didn't expect the volume of the number of people."

In her typical day, she handles e-mails and meets with lobbyists and constituents, Quigley said.

"I like the diversity of the day," she said. "I like that you never spend very long on one thing because there's always something popping up."

Every day is different in the office, said Scott, Mitchell's press secretary.

"That's what keeps it challenging and exciting at the same time," he said.

All in a day's work

Along with the staff's other duties, they have the responsibility of making sure Mitchell meets all his commitments, Scott said.

"The schedule changes on an hourly basis," he said. "This is a constant struggle for every congressional staff."

And to make it worse, votes are never on the schedule and sometimes are called with little warning, Scott added.

This can be especially difficult if the congressman is at a meeting off the hill, he said.

"We're all on the phone trying to find out if he can walk here, if he can hop in a cab, if we need to go get him," Scott said.

On the congressman's schedule, many items overlap.

"We have to make sure everyone who wants to meet with him can," he said.

On one busy day, a group of children and constituents from Tempe and Tucson stopped by the office and wound up with some face time with the congressman.

While the group was waiting for a tour set up by Mitchell's office, the congressman greeted them and took pictures.

Alyssa Miller, Mitchell's staff assistant and tour coordinator, would later take the group on a tour of the area.

Miller, who is also a history and political science senior at ASU, said the tours are one of her favorite parts of the job.

"I like the pace of everything," she said.

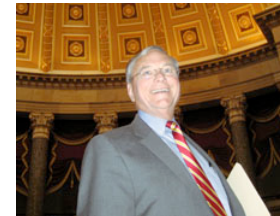
As the day rolled on, Mitchell and his staff continued meeting with constituents and lobbyists.

"One group after another," Mitchell said.

Show him the money

Along with his daily congressional activities, Mitchell has to squeeze in another priority: fundraising.

Despite being in office for about three months, Mitchell already has to look toward his next election.



Matt Stone / THE STATE PRESS

Mitchell points out his favorite things in Statuary Hall.



Matt Stone / THE STATE PRESS

Mitchell is constantly on the go, juggling appointments with constituents, votes on various measures, and party meetings.



Matt Stone / THE STATE PRESS

Mitchell speaks with an old friend, who runs his law office out of Phoenix.

This election season Mitchell raised more than \$1.9 million for his campaign, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

"My first duties are as a congressman, and I've tried to fit the fundraising in between that," he said.

While he has no set goal for the amount he wants to raise, Mitchell has already held a fundraising event in the district and in Washington.

Hayworth spent more than \$1 million more than Mitchell in the election.

"I'm just trying to raise as much as I can," Mitchell said.

In Hayworth's three previous elections, he raised less than \$1.5 million, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Still, if Mitchell were to aim at matching his 2006 total, he would have to raise more than \$2,500 every day until the Nov. 4, 2008, election.

The voting bell

To top off the daily routine, Mitchell and his staff have to keep an ear open for the call to vote on the floor.

Like a school bell, buzzers throughout the buildings signify the time to vote, giving the representatives 15 minutes to make it to the Capitol.

And while during appropriations week there is limited floor activity - with previous congressional sessions often recessing during appropriations week - they are still ready to drop everything and leave.

As a vote is called, Mitchell leaves his meeting and heads underground, where a series of tunnels connects the three office buildings and a subway-like system transports him to the Capitol.

Though the call to vote is often an interruption, Mitchell said he enjoys being on the floor with the other members.

"They're not stuck in committees, not stuck talking to constituents, not stuck in their offices," he said. "They're all on the floor and that's the only time you can socialize with them."

So far, Mitchell said he knows only about a hundred of the 435 members.

"They don't know me, but I know their name, and I know they are congressmen," he said. "It was easy when I was teaching - there was a seating chart."

But Mitchell does have some help - his brother gave him a pocket directory of all the members.

The size of Congress has been the biggest challenge for Mitchell so far.

"Because of the size of this place, things are done differently," he said.

There were about 90 members in the whole Arizona Senate when he served, Mitchell said, and some committees alone in Washington have close to that.

With 233 members in his party, constituents and lobbyists all vying for Mitchell's support, there could be pressure when it comes time to vote.

"There's pressure all the time," Mitchell said. "The pressure deals with different interests within your own party, different interests in your district, different interests in your staff. Everybody is trying to get your attention."

Of the votes Mitchell has cast since taking office, five have been against the Democrat majority - including a 'no' vote on the 2008 congressional budget that had no republican support, according to The Washington Post's vote database on April 10.

But Mitchell said the party leadership knows if they pushed freshmen to vote with the majority, they'd wind up being the minority party again.

"They don't want to jeopardize that and they're very understanding of that," he said. "Instead of trying to put pressure, they're trying to accommodate us so we can stay there."

With multiple votes sometimes happening in succession on the floor and an ample time limit given for each vote, Mitchell has the chance to stroll through the capitol.

And despite all his time spent in the building, he's still excited to walk around, pointing out facts and features in the different rooms.

As he walks through Statuary Hall - a room containing statues donated by all 50 states - he stares at the floor.

The room that used to act as the home for the U.S. House has gold plates scattered about on the floor, marking the spots where famous representatives sat.

When Mitchell found the one he was looking for - Abraham Lincoln's - he smiled.

It's this excitement that makes working for Mitchell fun, Scott said.

"He's like a kid in a candy store here in the capitol," Scott said.

The excitement also stems from the remarkable things Mitchell is already doing, he added.

Mitchell chairs the Veterans' Affairs Committee subcommittee Oversight and Investigations.

"Freshmen don't get to be chairmen of subcommittees," Scott said.

It's his position on this subcommittee that has propelled Mitchell into the headlines with the Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal.

After investigative articles in The Washington Post revealed the medical center had allegedly neglected patients, Mitchell's subcommittee became involved.

On March 10, Mitchell gave the democratic radio address, speaking for the party on what congress planned to do for the veterans.

And so far, this issue has defined his short tenure, Mitchell said.

"I think we've just hit the tip of the iceberg when it comes to veteran's issues and veterans affairs," he said.

Being thrust into the limelight hasn't been intimidating, Mitchell said.

"If you listen a while, it's the same reason I ran," Mitchell said. "You say 'I can do what they're doing, they didn't say anything that was so profound.'"

But just because he's climbed the political ladder with this mentality, it doesn't mean he'll run for the U.S. Senate.

"You'll do that when you're 80," Scott said to Mitchell, laughing.

Mitchell is the oldest member of the freshmen class, but said he doesn't give his age any thought.

And he's comfortable where he is now, Mitchell said.

"I don't have any plans of leaving soon," he said.

Related stories:

Part I | [It can be a long way to the top](#) Part II | [What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger](#)

Reach the reporter at: matthew.g.stone@asu.edu.

Copyright © 2001-06, ASU Web Devil. All rights reserved. No reprints without permission.

Online Editor In Chief: Jolie McCullough | Online Adviser: Jason Manning | Technical Contact: Jason Wulf

Classifieds Info: Online Classifieds | Advertising Info: Online Advertising

Contact Info | [Submit a Story](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)