

FRESHMAN REPUBLICAN GIVES BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT CONGRESS

Why would anybody want to run for Congress? Most Americans view the institution with about as much regard as they do mule skinnners and telephone marketers. You spend every waking hour raising money, making nice to cranky voters, running from meeting to meeting, getting your arm twisted by more special-interest groups than you can count and taking gratuitous potshots from smart-aleck columnists.

So why do it? Because you have a great opportunity to help people and to impact national policy, says freshman Republican Tom Price, who represents Georgia's 6th Congressional District, an area that includes portions of North Fulton, Cobb and Cherokee counties.

He certainly didn't take the job for the money. Like his 7th District neighbor, Republican Congressman Phil Gingrey, Price is a physician. He could be making a lot more dough in his specialty of orthopedic surgery than in trying to heal political wounds in Washington.

Low-key and self-effacing, Price backed into politics through medicine. "I am a third-generation doctor," he says, "and that's all I ever wanted to do." However, in 1993 as a member of the state medical society, he was asked to go around the state and speak in opposition to President Clinton's proposed health-care reforms. The experience convinced Dr. Price that he liked the interaction with people and might enjoy politics. He got his chance in 1996 when he was asked to run for the state Senate. Price served four terms in the Legislature, becoming the state's first Republican majority leader since Reconstruction. When the opportunity came to run for Congress in 2004, he did and won the seat that had belonged to Johnny Isakson, now in the U.S. Senate.

So far, Price says being a congressman has been both exhilarating and exhausting. His day starts at 7 a.m., which is about the only quiet time he has to read and study issues. Staff meetings start at 8 a.m. House committee meetings begin at 10 a.m. Sometimes, there can be two to four committees meeting at the same time, and the member is expected to be at all of them. Floor debates usually run from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and members can be called out of committee meetings or away from constituents a half-dozen times a day for roll-call votes. "Time management," Price says with understatement, "is the hardest thing a member of Congress has to learn."

Like those of us who watch from the sidelines, the freshman congressman decries the lack of civility in today's politics and blames a lot of it on the 24-hour news cycle. Rather than discussing a difference of opinion with a colleague, it is easier to run to the media with a nasty sound bite, which then requires a nasty sound bite from the other side, and on and on it goes.

Interestingly, Congressman Price also blames efforts to establish a "family-friendly" Congress for some of the discord. "Legislative weeks are shorter in order to give members more time with their family and more time back in the district," he says, "but it also means less time to get to know each other personally, and that results in a lot of impersonal name-calling."

Price is knee-deep in health-care issues as well as immigration and tax reform. But he says Job One is constituent service. Give the home folks the run-around when they are tangled in bureaucratic red tape, and you won't be in Washington very long. "I truly enjoy the job," he says, "because I really care about helping my constituents."

Over the years, I have seen a lot of well-intentioned people go to Washington, get a case of Potomac Fever and morph into self-important and self-serving windbags. Time will tell if Dr. Price is immune to Potomac Fever. I am betting he is. He doesn't need the job, doesn't have a big ego and seems to have his job priorities in the right order.

Having more people like Tom Price in Congress just might cause us to change our perception of the place. And that would be very bad news for mule skinnners, telephone marketers and smart-aleck columnists.