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JACK KINGSTON SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON CONGRESSIONAL WORKWEEK

If he had it to do over again, I suspect he would do it differently. Georgia's Republican 1st District Congressman Jack Kingston created a firestorm a few months ago when he complained publicly about the new Democratic majority's decision to go to five-day workweeks, instead of the customary three. The reaction to his comments was swift and negative, including a broadside from a certain cranky columnist. After all, Congress isn't exactly the most beloved institution in the land. To grump about toiling away five days a week at a job that doesn't require heavy lifting or a leather tool belt doesn't garner a lot of sympathy from working stiffs.

What he was trying to say, he told me recently at a breakfast hosted by our mutual friend, Roy Hodnett, the St. Simons real estate magnate, was that more time spent in the unreal world inside the Beltway is less time to be out in the district with constituents. "Are we more effective sitting in Washington talking to each other and to special-interest groups, or out among the people listening to their concerns?" he asked.

Ironically, it turns out the Democrats' big talk about a five-day workweek was a bunch of bilge water. As of the end of May, the 110th Congress is averaging fewer than 15 days a month in session. It is just as well. In that same period, a grand total of 26 bills have been passed, of which half were to name a building for somebody famous or almost-famous. No wonder Jack Kingston wants to get out of town. He just ought to have said it better.

I learned during my many years in and around Washington that a lot of politicians don't like to come back home. In D.C., they are treated like rock stars. Lobbyists fawn over them. Special-interest groups cater to them. Their staffs coddle them. It is very easy to get a serious case of self-importance in that kind of environment. Who wants to come back home and listen to folks rant about immigration as well as having to open your own doors? Evidently, Kingston does.

The congressman shared his travel schedule around his district, which includes 25 counties extending from Savannah to the Florida line and northwest to Warner Robins. On a recent 18-hour day that he describes as "typical," Kingston ranged from Savannah to Valdosta to Statenville to Homerville and back again. At every stop, he got an earful of advice from constituents.

Not surprisingly, he says what dominates the minds of his constituents these days are the two "I's": Iraq and immigration. There are a lot of military installations and personnel in his district, and Kingston is against a pullout in Iraq, which is most likely reflective of the mood of the majority of his constituents. "Don't tell me you support the troops, but not the war," he declares. "The war is the mission we have asked our troops to undertake." Amen.

To his credit and unlike some of his colleagues in Congress, Kingston has a clear sense of the anger of most rank-and-file Americans regarding the immigration mess and a distrust in the federal government's ability to fix it. That sense, he emphasizes, comes from being out in the district talking to his constituents. (Take that, smart-alecky columnist!)

As we were winding up, I asked the congressman why he continues to appear with uber-liberal weenie television host Bill Maher. "More young people watch his show than the Sunday news shows," he says, "This is the 'Gen-X' crowd, and Republicans had better start appealing to a wider audience than white men in blue suits." He makes a good point but one on which we will have to disagree. I'd rather be seen buck-naked at a goat race than associating with a jerk like Bill Maher.

It was a good meeting. I found Jack Kingston to be a solid guy and one who takes his congressional responsibilities seriously. I would only suggest that the next time he contemplates a press release complaining about the length of the congressional workweek, he take a cold shower instead. That dog won't hunt.