

Wednesday, July 19, 2006

If you've ever watched House proceedings on CSPAN, and wondered how Members are recognized to speak and for how long, join me for Wednesday evenings' debate on a resolution condemning the most recent terrorist attacks against Israel.

6:30 PM: After learning that the House is commencing debate on this resolution, I inform my Legislative Director that I wish to participate. She tells me that it may be difficult. The House Leadership has allocated a total of one hour of debate, divided evenly between Democrats and Republicans. Members of the International Committee will be recognized first. If there is remaining time, non-Committee Members will be recognized on a "first-come, first serve basis." It doesn't look good.

7:15 PM: I meet with two high school students from Long Island, then drive across Washington to meet with members of the New York State Bankers Association. As we leave, I ask my Legislative Director for an update on Floor proceedings. She calls another staff member and then advises me that if I rush to the Floor, it will be possible to reserve time to speak.

8:00 PM: I enter the House Chamber and the scene is immediately discouraging. Most of the Members of the International Relations Committee -- the ones who should have already spoken -- are still in their seats. They have been there for two hours, and only a handful of Members have spoken. The one hour of debate has already been extended. We are plodding through the debate. But there is really very little debate. Virtually everyone on both sides of the aisle is agreeing; but it's taking hours for them to express that agreement.

I sit beside Congressman Tom Lantos. As the Ranking Democrat on the International Relations Committee, he manages my party's portion of the debate. He decides who will speak, and how much time they will be granted. And he dispenses that time like gold.

"Is it impossible to get time?" I ask.

"We'll extend the debate," he responds. "If you're willing to wait an hour."

On the table in front of him is a thick deck of yellow index cards. The name of every Member who wishes to speak is scrawled on a card. He adds my card to the deck. In the back. Way in the back.

Still, I look on the bright side. I will have time for dinner.

DIARY OF A FLOOR SPEECH

Tuesday, July 18, 2006

8:15 PM: In the Democratic Cloakroom, I order an elegant congressional dinner: one peanut butter and jelly on rye, one bag of potato chips, a diet sprite and, (I must admit, even if my wife reads this) a candy-bar for dessert. The cloakroom has all the charm of a shopping-mall snack bar. Rep. Allyson Schwartz (PA), Adam Schiff (CA) and I lean against a counter, munching on our meals, while a television blares speeches from the Floor nearby.

8:30 PM: I push through the cloakroom doors and return to a seat on the Floor. Both Parties have agreed to a "unanimous consent" motion to extend the debate another forty minutes. But there are still many Members waiting, and even more are reporting to the Floor, pushing me even further behind. I sit beside Rep. Joe Crowley, and begin a skeletal outline of the speech I hope to give. I don't know whether I will have thirty seconds or five minutes. In Congress, last minute adjustments are common.

10:00 PM: An hour and a half has passed, and I seem no closer to recognition than I was at 6:30.

I ask Rep. Lantos' staffer how many Members are ahead of me. He flips through the deck of yellow cards, which has grown even thicker as additional Members drift onto the Floor. There are still eight 8 Democrats (and presumably as many Republicans) ahead of me. One problem is that many Members are recognized by Rep. Lantos for a set time (two minutes, five minutes) and when the persistent tapping of the Speaker's gavel warns them that they have exceeded the limit, they request "an additional minute." Being a gentleman, Rep. Lantos grants the requests. But without an extension of the entire debate, every additional minute taken by a Member means a minute deducted from those of us who have not yet spoken. Time is simply running out.

10:10 PM: I make a decision. I will ask for a "unanimous consent" request, which is designed for just this kind of situation. It allows a Member to very briefly rise in support or opposition to the resolution, and then ask that a full text of a speech be inserted in the Congressional Record. The problem is that I don't have a full text of a speech. I was prepared to use some rough talking points which I had scribbled earlier in the evening. Now I must write a full text.

10:15 PM: I duck into a small room on the side of the Chamber. It has two computers and a printer, and I begin typing, as fast as I can.

10:20 PM: Just as I hit the "print" button, Rep. Lantos' staff member pokes his head into the room.

"Mr. Israel, you're next."

Back to Plan A. I will give my speech, after all. As I said, last-minute adjustments are common.

"How much time can you give me?" I ask the staffer.

He holds up two fingers.

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I gather my papers -- a five minute speech which I must now present in two -- and follow him back to the Floor.

10:25 PM: The Speaker's gavel warns Rep. Nadler that his time has elapsed. Jerry asks Rep. Lantos for additional time, and gets thirty seconds. When he finishes, Lantos stands. "Madame Speaker, I am pleased to yield two minutes to the gentleman from New York, Congressman Israel."

10:30 PM: I lean into the microphone. "Madame Speaker, I rise in support of this resolution..."

Two minutes later, I finish. It has taken me four hours to speak for two minutes. And now I begin a 12 minute walk home, through a dark and oppressively hot Washington evening. But at least I was able to make my point.

Posted by: SI