

Why Ex-Congressmen Stay Around After They Leave Capitol Hill

The author is a freelance journalist based in Washington.

By KAREN FELD

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WASHINGTON (INA) -- "I don't want to embarrass the Wichita Falls folks, but, yes, it would be dull back there," says former Rep. Graham Purcell, D-Texas. "You can afford to be dull if you can make a living, but I thought I could do better here."

"The bright lights are here. This is the best game. You get used to it. Politicians with their egos have got to be where the fastest game in town is," according to former Rep. Bill Stuckey, D-Ga.

"I just have to keep occupied, and I knew the opportunity to be occupied was greater here than down home," is why former House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Wilbur Mills, D-Ark. is still in the capital. "See, I lived in a town of about 1,500 people and I wouldn't be satisfied just going to the drugstore to get coffee at 3 or 4 o'clock every afternoon and to sit down and visit. It wouldn't appeal to me. I couldn't stay sober doing that. I'd bust out."

Many former members of Congress upon retirement or defeat have chosen to remain in the Washington area, rather than to return to that place called "home" from where they were first elected. Approximately 200 of them now live in Washington and their number is expected to grow in the wake of Tuesday's GOP landslide, when the Republicans captured 13 Democratic seats in the Senate and cut handsomely into the Democratic majority in the House.

For about 25 percent of ex-congressmen, there was no turning back once they saw the klieg lights. But many of them never gave much thought to life after Congress, although some who stay in Washington become more powerful after Capitol Hill. Andrew J. Biemiller, D-Wis., after losing his House seat, took a position directing the legislative department of the AFL-CIO. His influence over legislation was greater as a lobbyist than would have been possible as a member of Congress.

"Financially, the reward of being a former member of Congress means more in Washington than somewhere else," says Walter Flowers, D-Ala., who was making a comfortable living as an attorney in Tuscaloosa prior to his election to the House. "There's more financial opportunity in Washington, more trafficking off of what you were and who you were," he says. "I relinquished my law practice at home. All the clients that I once had belong to somebody else now.

"Anybody who served 10 years in the House ought to be well-known throughout his congressional district, but converting that into a paying client for a lawyer, or into a good business position for a businessperson, would be very difficult because you've gotten out of touch with the mainstream of the regular law practice for the period you've been in Congress."

After his unsuccessful bid for the Senate in 1978, the Alabaman joined a Washington law firm.

Washington often is a practical solution to an economic problem, something more immediate than a lifetime case of Potomac Fever. Members of Congress quickly become accustomed to a lifestyle which includes jetting around the globe on committee fact-finding missions; nightly cocktail receptions and dinners; free staff; office space; parking; long distance telephone lines; use of the gym; and other perks. After Congress, they need a greater income to support the lifestyle to which they have grown accustomed. Few accept less than six-figure salaries when they leave Congress.

"I anticipated starting off making at least twice as much money," says Flowers.

One reason they are able to command high fees in Washington is that their congressional experience is presumed to make them experts in dealing with the legislative process.

Those who stay can be found in Cabinet positions, government agencies, law firms, trade associations, teaching positions, on congressional staffs, in the lay ministry and on publication mastheads. Some are retired, such as H.R. Gross, R-Iowa, the cantankerous gentleman who represented Waterloo, Iowa, for more than a quarter of a century; others have put their life on hold while they wander congressional corridors or Capitol Hill pubs clinging to memories and deliberating whether to run just one more time.

Congress has changed in recent years. It has become a year-round job with constituents demanding more of their legislators. With the limitations on outside income, many cannot afford to stay in Congress and support their families while maintaining two homes.

"It was costing me money being in Congress. Was my ego worth losing 'x' number of dollars a year?" Bill Stuckey, D-Ga., asked himself. He and others such as Tom Rees, D-Calif., Bill Hungate, D-Mo., and David Henderson, D-N.C., became disillusioned or frustrated with the system and retired at a relatively young age. Those who leave public life voluntarily usually find greater options in the private sector.

A law degree or service on a powerful committee, such as Ways and Means in the House, generally means more in terms of earning power after Congress. Rees, 51, who was in the international export business prior to serving in Congress, didn't become a lawyer until after he was in Congress, self-taught through correspondence and tapes.

"When I left Congress, I didn't leave Congress to leave Washington; I left Congress to leave government and politics," says Rees, who is now practicing law and lobbying. He represents the nation's three largest savings and loan associations, all based in his home state of California. Rees doesn't view Washington as a final resting place, but says, "I can't afford to live in Beverly Hills."

"I have to make a living. My name is well-known here and that's what it takes for lawyers. It doesn't matter how good you are. It just matters how well your name is known," admits James Abourezk, D-S.D., who made a name for himself in the Senate in 1977 when he held up adjournment to filibuster against natural gas deregulation. "If I weren't making a living here, I probably wouldn't have stayed," continues Abourezk, who after leaving the Senate represented Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

"I find that having been in Congress is an asset because you get an understanding of how the system works, where the pressure points are, and how individuals view themselves and the process," says Jim Symington, D-Mo., now a partner in a Washington law firm. Many former members of Congress who join law firms are actually lobbyists, although most shudder at the word. Former Sen. Charles Goodell, R-N.Y., prefers the term, "legislative attorney."

Lobbying is not really a new role for anyone who has ever served in Congress since congressmen are always lobbying one another to gain support for a particular bill. "There's nothing wrong with it except I just didn't feel like I wanted to go out and impose on my friends and make money doing it," says Wilbur Mills.

Former Rep. Frank Ikard, D-Texas, agrees with Mills. "I think a former member should have the right to The Floor (a lifetime perk), but I don't feel that I ought to exercise it," says Ikard, who had an oil and gas law practice and then became a trial judge in Wichita Falls, a town of about 100,000 before serving six terms in the House. He resigned from the House in the mid-1960s and accepted a position with the American Petroleum Institute, and within a few years became its president. "I didn't go back to Wichita Falls because the economic opportunities weren't there," says Ikard, who admits his goals changed once he arrived in Washington.

"I have something to sell here and I would have had to develop something back home," says former Rep. Jack McDonald, R-Mich., who is not an attorney, but uses his congressional experience to serve clients as a business consultant and mayor of a Detroit suburb before Congress, has a client list which includes: American Express, Dow Chemical and Northrop Aviation.

"No one was knocking down the door trying to hire me back in Indiana," admits Roger Zion, R-Ind., who was defeated after four terms in the House. An executive with Mead-Johnson and Co. for 20 years before coming to Congress, he found himself in a situation similar to that of McDonald. "I'm embarrassed to be beat, but not so embarrassed that I don't show up at the country club," he adds. But in Washington, Zion, who was chairman of the Republican Task Force on Energy and Resources, and who served on the energy subcommittee of Public Works opened up shop as an energy consultant.

Initially, he officed alone, "but I got lonesome. I missed my 12 in staff," says Zion, who now shares office space with other ex-members of Congress. Many former members stick together and often continue work in an area which is an extension of their efforts on the Hill. They even surround themselves with congressional photos and mementos including their desk and chair, which they can purchase for \$25 each upon leaving the House or Senate.

Congressional experience is translated into bigger bucks in the Washington market, but there is also a feeling of being closer to decisions of national and international consequence in Washington. "You don't feel like you're quite as far out to pasture if you keep up with things that go on in Washington," says Graham Purcell, D-Texas.

"It would be difficult to completely change gears right away, to go back to (Orlando, Fla.), and to do nothing, but write wills, when you're used to dealing with international issues," says Louis Frey, R-Fla., who joined a Washington law firm after he was defeated in a bid for the governorship in 1978. (Frey also recently lost out on a chance to run for Sen. Richard Stone's seat; he lost in a primary runoff to the eventual election winner, Paula Hawkins.) In the House, Frey helped rewrite the Communications Act and much of his current law practice is business and communications oriented.

"My interests can be developed here, particularly in health, in environment, and in energy. This is where there would be more need for my services," says Paul Rogers, D-Fla., the chairman of the powerful Public Health and Environment subcommittee of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, who retired from Congress in 1978 at the height of his career after serving a dozen terms. He joined the Washington offices of Hogan and Hartzen.

"In Washington, you feel that at any minute you might have a chance to make a difference. When you're back home (in St. Louis), you're only reacting to press, radio, or TV, and not with any of the personalities," says Jim Symington. That's one dimension of Washington life that holds Symington here, although he feels close to Missouri and has even written and recorded ballads about his home state.

When he was defeated in his bid for the Senate in 1976, he asked himself, "How do you reduce the campaign debt, and also maintain the kind of interest you have in what was, for me, a permanent lifetime interest in public affairs?" He felt staying in Washington was more in line with those objectives than going back to his old law practice in St. Louis.

Bill Stuckey, who retired from Congress to run his family business (Stuckey stores, Dairy Queens, timber, and other investments), chose to do so from Washington rather than Georgia in part because his children are in school here. That factor also figured in Rogers' and Symington's decision.

Just as these ex-members remained in Washington because their families are here, Ronald Sarasin, R-Conn., is one of a growing number of congressmen whose marriages broke up under the Washington pressure. For him, it was a matter of practicality to stay in Washington. "What do I have to go home to in Beacon Falls, a town of 3,600 people?" asks Sarasin, who was a country lawyer there.

Ted Risenhoover, D-Okla., remained single during his two terms in Congress. "I knew everybody in my hometown," he says. "I had no strong social ties there as far as women were concerned." Risenhoover now toils at the Department of the Army.

While Martha Keys, D-Kans., was in Congress, she divorced her husband and married a colleague, Rep. Andy Jacobs Jr., D-Ind. She is currently assistant secretary of education and lives with her husband and son in nearby Virginia.

"I wasn't career oriented," she says. "I was a person who was oriented toward change. As you start working in things at different levels, each level leads to another. When you find an opportunity to take a policy-making role, you jump in and take it."

Many others have also taken advantage of opportunities they never dreamed existed before Congress. But some have not been so lucky.

"I think people put us right down there with chiropractors and used car salesmen," says Stuckey, who feels the job of a congressman is no longer viewed as prestigious. This may account for the difficulty that Sarasin, Peter Kyros, D-Me., and others had in finding jobs following their defeat. When Sarasin came to Congress, he terminated his association with a law firm in his district.

He gave up a safe House seat to run for governor, "conscious of the fact that the ballgame could be over," but never giving a thought to how difficult it would be to get placed if he was unsuccessful. After a tedious six-month job search, Sarasin found work as a management consultant for Alexander Proud Foot Co., a firm in the productivity business, and is of counsel to an area law firm where his work is in the field of product liability.

"Initially, I felt really hang dog. I thought it was really terrible to lose," says Kyros, who spent two years looking for work and contemplating another race. After a 1976 attempt was aborted through an error in filing of documents, he decided to remain in Washington, where his son and daughter live. He was divorced during his service in Congress. Kyros is now counsel to the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, the same committee he served on as a member of Congress. His salary is \$44,000, about the same as his salary when he left the House (before more recent pay raises). Kyros, who doesn't regard his staff position as a step down because he is dealing with issues which are important to him, is one of several ex-members who have worked as committee staff following defeat at the polls.

The transition from public life to life in the private sector is a difficult one, but gradual in Washington. After defeat, it's easier for those already in Washington to stay, not just physically, but also emotionally.

When Wilbur Mills retired following his plunge in the Tidal Basin with Fanne Fox and his admission of alcoholism, he was faced with a decision.

"I couldn't make up my mind in the beginning whether I wanted to actually resume any activities or whether I just wanted to mope -- I did that for seven or eight months," says Mills. "I stayed on here because if I wanted to do anything I'd do it here rather than in Arkansas. This was the place where I thought I could do more good. I have to do those things that are necessary to keep my mind satisfied to where I don't want to drink."

In order to do that, Mills became of counsel to Shea Gould Climenko and Casey, where his expertise in tax matters is in great demand. He also spends about one-third of his time speaking around the country on alcoholism.

The elective political career is generally over for those who stay. Few get elected at home by staying in Washington. But for some, such as Symington, Washington affords a base and keeps the hope alive for an appointment, such as a Cabinet slot or ambassadorship in a future administration.

Symington feels there ought to be a school for prospective congressmen, as well as "a Society for the Protection of ex-Congressmen." His advice is to have your life in order when you first make the effort to run. "Think ahead to that turn in the road. Two years is a very short time to kick away for a lifetime of security," says Symington.

Just as there is a caucus on Capitol Hill for every imaginable interest, the Former Members of Congress even have their own alumni association which was founded in 1970 by two former members: Brooks Hays, D-Ark., and Dr. Walter Judd, R-Minn. Although the initial intent was principally social, they are now compiling a congressional oral history and have developed a campus fellows program, essentially a public relations vehicle to boost the image of Congress as an institution.

What is it really like being a former member of Congress?

"It's like being taken off a fast treadmill," says Stuckey. "You're no longer somebody they're always making a fuss over, taking care of every little whim," he continued. But it is difficult to step off that treadmill, which is why so many keep up the same routine, a fast paced lifestyle, including travel, packaging deals, and finding a cause to perpetuate."

In spite of the fact that some members of Congress go back to their districts on weekends and complain about Washington, most admit, "It's not a bad place to live." In fact, once you have had the experience of serving in the most exclusive club in the world, the U.S. Congress, home is never quite the same again.