[ms-0398.027.010.030]

HOW TO APPROACH YOUR CONGRESSMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: Many Americans have a sincere desire to have more of a voice in the Federal Government than merely voting in national elections.

To better equip themselves with information on major Congressional issues thousands of businessman-citizens throughout the nation serve on Congressional Action Committees in their local Chambers of Commerce, or in Trade or Professional Associations.

In the following article, Frank N. Ikard provides suggestions, from a Congressman's point of view, based on his 10 years of service as the Representative of the 13th Congressional District of Texas. Now President of the American Petroleum Institute, Mr. Ikard has written and spoken extensively on this topic.

By Frank N. Ikard

PEOPLE HAVE WANTED to know how to influence Congressmen since the first days of our Republic. In recent years, even Madison Avenue has come into the act. Instructions, bulletins, pamphlets, and recommendations in depth have poured out from New York and Washington headquarters of various organizations to the grassroots level, urging each member to "write his Congressman" on issues affecting the organization.

As a Member of Congress for 10 years, including six on the Ways and Means Committee, I was on the receiving end of this barrage of response.

My recommendations for effective communications are simple:
(1) Know your Congressman; (2) Know your subject; and (3) Know the procedure to follow.

1. Know your Congressman. If you don't, it is your own fault; a Congressman is about the easiest public servant to meet. Up for reelection every other year, he has little time to mend fences, work up grassroots support, or find material support. He must continually maintain all of these prerequisites. If he ever loses these contacts, he will be replaced by a new man who has been "out meeting the people."

When he does get back to his district, he is eager to meet as many constituents as possible. He wants to know you and your problems even more than you want to know him. Next time your Congressman comes home, go to his office and meet him. Then, later, when you get in touch with him, he will have a personal feeling about your problems.

This applies to every constituent, regardless of party. Suppose you are a Republican and your Congressman a Democrat who knows you have not supported him in the past. Get to know him, anyway. More votes cast in the House and Senate cross party lines than those cast strictly along party lines. Your Congressman represents all his district, Democrats and Republicans alike. He desires to please all his people all the time, even though he knows this is impossible. Because you are on the opposite side, he should be doubly eager to find some common ground to win your support. To the true profesional in politics, the best way to destroy one's enemies is to make friends out of them.

Don't fall out with him because he doesn't vote your way on every issue. Keep your eye on the main issue. Suppose, for instance, your principal interest is legislation on the taxation of cooperatives. After discussing it with your Congressman, if you feel you see eye to eye on it, don't ruin this beautiful relationship by writing him a nasty letter when he votes for a new dam in the West, or more public housing in the East. You don't know what his commitments are on these subjects. Give him the benefit of the doubt. He will appreciate it.

2. Know your subject. Of the sackful of mail hauled into a Congressman's office every morning, only about 1 letter in 25 will be from a constituent who really knows his subject. The Congressman has, at best, only 3 or 4 staff members to answer about 300 letters a day. They can't tarry trying to explain in detail what the facts are because tomorrow will bring in another 300 letters. So, the misinformed letterwriter receives a vague but pleasant stock reply that pleases no one, including the Congressman.

In 1962, the Senate Finance Committee was holding hearings on a tax bill that would have withheld, at the source, a percentage of interest and dividends. Senators on the Committee averaged as many as 3,000 to 5,000 letters a day on this issue. They were apalled to learn from these letters that many of their constituents didn't know they already owe income tax on their interest and dividends. Their indignation only emphasized what the Treasury Department contended all along; that many citizens, through ignorance, were not paying this tax.

So, if you don't know your subject, your letter could do more harm than good.

The best evidence, as in court, is your own personal experience. Base your request on what you know from your own experience. Give your Congressman facts

and figures clearly and concisely. Tell him how the issue would affect your own business.

One good source of information is your trade organization. Most of them have staffs in Washington who keep a constant stream of advice pouring out on every subject that would affect your business or organization. They're not always infallible, but on the whole, they do a good job in keeping you informed about what is happening in Washington.

3. Know the procedures to follow. Let us assume your primary issue is taxation of cooperatives. Your Congressman is, let us say, a member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. As such, he attends daily committee meetings from 10 a.m. until Congress convenes at noon. He's an expert on subjects under consideration by his committee, but not necessarily on other matters. From noon until about 6 p.m. he is on the floor of the House where legislation being voted upon requires his presence, or else he is back meeting with his committee. After 6 p.m. he gets a chance to read and sign the answers to today's 300 letters. Even putting in a 10- to 12-hour day, he won't know too much about the taxation of cooperatives, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ways and Means Committee.

Therefore, put your problem on a personal basis. He is a lot more interested in you and your financial well-being than in the impersonal problem of a general tax bill, which is the task of the Ways and Means Committee. He rarely knows what a bill will contain (unless it arises in his own committee) until the proper committee reports it out favorably. Often the bill reported out by the committee only faintly resembles the bill originally introduced. So, why should he waste time studying legislation before it is being considered in committee?

Let's go back to your letter about taxation of cooperatives. Ask your Congressman to discuss it with your regional representative on the Ways and Means Committee. Each Member elected to that committee represents a region of the United States. For instance, on the committee I represented not only Texas, but New Mexico, as well. Therefore, ask your own Congressman to consider your request, and, if he approves, to discuss it personally with the member on the Ways and Means Committee who represents your area. . . .

A constituent who follows the procedure I have recommended has not only the weight of his own testimony, in his letter, but the added persuasion of his Congressman's endorsement. Remember, it is your Congressman, regardless of his political affiliation or committee assignment, who will cast that vote on the floor of the House eventually. Also, by proceeding through him, you avoid the appearance of bypassing him in appealing to the members of the committee "over his head." Some Congressmen consider this an affront.

Timing is also very important. Write to your Congressman when the bill is pending in committee. Do not wait until the bill is brought to the floor. The place to "kill" a measure or amend it favorably is in committee. Your Congressman will be helpless if your appeal reaches him after the bill has been reported from the committee to the floor. This is particularly true in matters arising in Ways and Means Committee, because most of these bills are brought to the floor under a closed rule: no amendments can be offered from the floor.

Don't wait until a measure has already passed the House and is pending in the Senate committee. About all your Congressman can do then is refer you to your two Senators, who may not be in a position to assist you.

Some do's and dont's:

Do try to talk to him personally about your legislation. If this is impossible, write him a letter on your business letterhead printed, and your name signed legibly or typed at the bottom. Keep it simple and personal. Show by facts and figures how you, yourself, will be affected. A letter is better than a telegram. Each day a Congressman may get from 20 to 50 telegrams, urging his vote for or against legislation. Many of them don't give enough information about either the constituent or the bill he's interested in. And the Congressman and his staff don't have much time to dig up this information, especially toward adjournment.

If your Congressman pleases you with his vote on any issue, write him and tell him so. After each roll-call vote on any major issue, Congressmen are braced for a deluge of mail from displeased constituents. Those who agree seldom express their approval.

About half of a Congressman's mail pertains to things the constituent wants done. The other half consists of requests to vote a certain way on legislation. The conscientious Congressman—and most are—tries to fulfill all these requests. Once in a great while, he receives a letter thanking him. When he has voted your way, write and thank him. He will remember.

Don't feel your letter would impose on your Congressman. As long as he gets letters from home, he knows he is on the right wavelength. If the mail drops off, he begins to wonder which fences have broken down. He wants to know what his constituency is thinking.

I have purposely ignored *"pressure mail."* This type of approach is of very little benefit to your cause. The Congressman cannot completely ignore it. But in the long run it carries very little weight, and sometimes it defeats its own purpose.

It is the straightforward letter that commands your Congressman's respect. He never tires of hearing from constituents who can contribute to the welfare of the Nation. He knows he is their voice in Washington. Your Congressman is profoundly influenced by your opinions.

KEY TO ROOM NUMBERS

SENATE

DIRKSEN (DSOB): 4 DIGITS

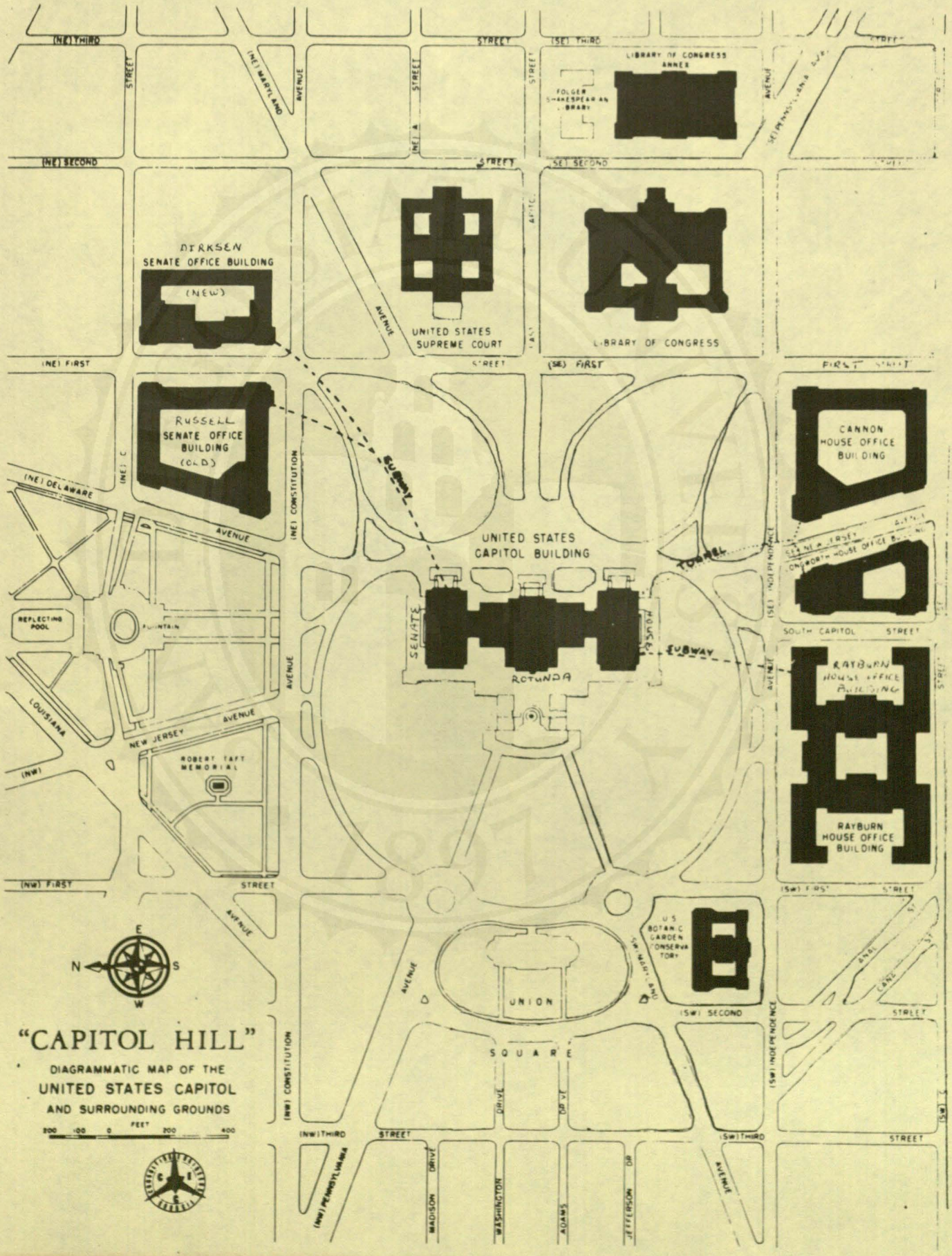
RUSSELL (RSOB): 3 DIGITS

HOUSE:

CANNON (CHOB): 3 DIGITS

LONGWORTH (LHOB): 4 DIGITS (BEGINNING WITH "1")

RAYBURN (RHOB): 4 DIGITS (BEGINNING WITH "2")



"CAPITOL HILL"

DIAGRAMMATIC MAP OF THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL AND SURROUNDING GROUNDS

200 100 0 FEET 200 400