

CARNEGIE SUMMER 2007 Results

Carnegie Results is a quarterly newsletter published by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It highlights Corporation-supported organizations and projects that have produced reports, results or information of special note.

The Aspen Institute Congressional Program: *A Nonpartisan Success Story*

This is an analysis of a bipartisan congressional project first funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Aspen Institute Congressional Program, which is dedicated to educating lawmakers, now has numerous supporters; yet with a leadership change ahead, it faces an uncertain future.

Members of Congress from both sides of the aisle acknowledge that Washington has become more partisan than ever. Acrimony and bitter rhetoric often mark public discussion of major issues. Depending on which side is in power, Democrats and Republicans alike complain that the other side denies them the opportunity for true congressional debate.

Meanwhile, as Iraq and the upcoming presidential election regularly grab headlines, critical long-term issues such as relations with Russia and the education of the nation's children can often be relegated to the legislative back burner. It is against this challenging backdrop that the Aspen Institute Congressional Program operates. Founded in 1950, the Aspen Institute is an international nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., which is dedicated to fostering enlightened leadership and open-minded dialogue.

The Aspen Institute Congressional Program, established in 1983 by former U.S. Senator Dick Clark, is a nongovernmental, nonpartisan educational program for members of the United States Congress. It provides lawmakers with a stronger grasp of critical public policy issues by convening high-level conferences in which legislators — from both parties and both houses — are brought together with internationally recognized academics, experts and leaders. The agenda is devoted to explaining ideas and exploring various policy alternatives. Political neutrality is essential to the educational mission of the program. There is no identification with a political or party viewpoint and no endorsement of specific legislation. The Aspen

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Institute organizes six retreat programs annually: Political Islam; U.S.-Russia-Europe: Cooperative Efforts; U.S. Policy in Latin America; U.S.-China Relations; and The Challenge of Education Reform.

Carnegie Corporation of New York provided the initial grants and continues to fund two of Aspen Institute's most influential congressional retreat programs: U.S.-Russia and Education Reform. There is substantial history behind these programs. The U.S.-Russia Program was born more than 20 years ago while the Cold War was still a dominant issue. The Education Reform Program came into being the following decade. From the Reagan revolution of the 1980's to the impeachment proceedings of the 90's to the congressional changeover to Democratic control in 2007, the Aspen Institute Congressional Program has remained a constant through political and policy upheaval.

While the foreign policy- and education-oriented conferences are independent programs with unrelated agendas, several influential members of Congress participate in both. The two programs are also joined together by the fact that they are a single long-running intellectual experiment designed to discover what happens when you take members of Congress out of the fractious partisan atmosphere of Washington, D.C. and give them the opportunity to speak freely about the issues, guided in their study by national and international scholars.

The yardstick of success in the legislative realm goes beyond talk to results delivered. While the Aspen Institute Congressional Program is deliberately designed not to advocate for specific issues, representatives and senators clearly focus on the policy implications of their discussions. Can members of Congress deal with real issues sans soundbites and media entourages? Legislators and observers alike claim they can. The retreats have played a powerful role say sponsors of significant foreign and education policy, who believe the impetus for these accomplishments came from Aspen Institute conferences. In fact,

landmark legislation traceable to the Congressional Program conferences ranges from nuclear threat reduction to No Child Left Behind.

Sponsors of Aspen-inspired legislation cite the freewheeling debate and access to experts as spurs to progress in the lawmaking process. Freed from the frustrating time constraints of Capitol Hill, members of Congress can spend days immersed in issues—rather than the mere minutes they may have available in Washington. Immersion in the Russia and Education programs is near total, from seminars to socializing. One key factor in Aspen Institute's success, both Republicans and Democrats report, is the way it fosters an atmosphere that facilitates bipartisan consensus back home. Experiences shared as Americans in another culture effectively build relationships between members of opposite parties or different legislative bodies who might never see each other inside the Beltway. Simply going for a walk together or picking the brains of experts in the field in ad hoc discussions, as well as sharing meals and informal discussions, can result in significant bonding. Even dinner seating is rotated to ensure maximum exposure to other legislators and scholars.

The cost of both the U.S.-Russia and Education programs is about a million dollars annually, a figure that has remained more or less constant in recent years. To date, the Russia Program has received about \$13 million in grants from Carnegie Corporation, and the Education Program has received over \$5 million. Some of the funds awarded to the Aspen Institute pay the expenses of members of Congress and their spouses, which has predictably raised a few eyebrows in the current climate of travel-related congressional scandals.

Participants, though, brush off any criticism of the program, pointing out that Aspen Institute seeks no legislative favors and requires serious work from every legislator who attends. Strict rules about participation are mailed along with the program invitations. Unlike many Washington events, Aspen Institute does not allow “drop by” participation and

while there may be free time, it is most often used to meet with scholars. None of the sessions at these four-day conferences may be skipped. This seriousness of purpose is one of the Congressional Program's distinguishing characteristics, along with its blend of bipartisanship, organization, and policy impact.

Nonpartisanship and Friendship

A carefully calculated nonpartisan appeal to Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives is the Aspen Institute Congressional Program's greatest asset. Deliberately designed as a bonding experience to break down partisan barriers, this atmosphere is fostered by unconstrained discussion that does not aim toward a specific outcome other than to advance discussion of the issues. "There's no agenda there other than to pull experts and policymakers into one room in a sustained interaction," observes Carnegie Corporation's Deana Arsenian, who is program director of the Russian Higher Education and Eurasia Program and vice president for International Program Coordination.

Largely as a result of its neutrality, the Aspen Institute Congressional Program provides a "way to look for common ground," says Rep. Henry Waxman. "The discussion flows in a way that allows give and take, more thoughtful presentation and an opportunity for people to hear different views and think about them as opposed to a talking-point situation...where no one's listening." Abandoning partisanship during the discussions is strongly emphasized in Clark's opening charge to members of Congress. We are not here to proclaim which party is right or wrong—you all are bombarded with that daily," Clark tells the legislators.

"We strive here for civility—even when we disagree," he adds. This doesn't mean the Congressional Program is an ideological utopia totally free of politically tinged discussion. Partisanship can still surface at times. Clark himself acknowledges that his strenuous attempt to keep the discussion collegial "doesn't always work...

Somebody is bound to say, 'Well, Dick is not going to like me saying this, but I think the President...'" Controversial topics may change, but they don't disappear. In 2007, "the Iraq war is one issue that may need especially sensitive handling to prevent political disputes, even during meals," acknowledges Deana Arsenian. "Iraq has raised some partisanship at the dinner table."

"Occasionally there are rigorous differences of opinion that do not break along partisan lines," points out Daniel Fallon, program director for Higher Education. "That is especially true of hot-button issues in education, such as some of the provisions of the No Child Left Behind act."

Another way the Congressional Program bonds lawmakers of all persuasions is by holding programs in overseas locations that may provide an extra opportunity for learning together and forming friendships. For the Russia Program in particular, the sites may be steeped in European history, from ancient wonders to modern horrors. During the summer 2006 U.S.-Russia meeting in Krakow, Poland, for example, participants were taken to the site of the Auschwitz Nazi concentration camp — an emotional experience that was seared in their collective memory.

"You can't go to Auschwitz without being affected by it," declares Republican Senator Robert Bennett. The visit is especially relevant today, he says, with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and others disputing "all of this history." After the visit, "I understand in ways I had never before, just how serious all of this is," Bennett stresses. Although it was a supplementary activity, the Auschwitz visit had serious policy implications. Describing the rebirth of anti-Semitism in Europe as "very scary" in light of Holocaust history, Bennett notes "we have to deal with it" in making decisions on U.S. aid and policy. As he explains, back in Washington, when related issues arise, you can look over at your colleague in a way that says "we understand; we've seen that."

The informal atmosphere of the Aspen Institute Congressional Program fosters relationships among members of Congress that outweigh political differences, Bennett believes. "I've developed friendships with peo-

ple, quite frankly, many constituents are startled to find I even talk to,” he says. Republican Bennett struck up an unlikely friendship with Democratic Representative George Miller of California, even though he’s “about as far from where I am on environmental issues as anybody can get. He had the reputation of being a very hard-nosed liberal.” But when he sat down with Miller “in the atmosphere of the whole experience,” Bennett found out “much to my surprise, he’s quite reasonable.” Similarly, Miller says by talking informally with a political adversary he could “discover that the national interest is not really solely the province” of either party. Such bipartisan friendships can be very helpful in the legislative wrangling needed for success on Capitol Hill. In a House-Senate conference committee meeting to work out legislation, “I’m sure the experience at Aspen Institute would help in overcoming differences,” Bennett says.

The benefits of the Congressional Program can translate into legislation even if a bill’s sponsors weren’t present. This was the case when the Education Program paved the way for the major Obey-Porter School Reform act. David Obey, a powerful member of Congress and Aspen Institute regular, found his legislative effort boosted by a program he had not attended. Encouraged by his staff to produce a school reform initiative, Democrat Obey mentioned the concept to Republican colleague Jon C. Porter and received a surprising response: “Oh sure, we talked about it at the last Aspen Institute Conference.” Because of the Congressional Program, Porter “understood what I was trying to do,” Obey says. Although they hadn’t attended the program together, their Aspen Institute-aided partnership got the legislation passed “and funded it for a number of years.” Fallon adds, “We think of the Obey-Porter whole school reform act as a clear example of how the latest research can positively inform the legislative process.”

The lack of political bias is a striking feature of the Aspen Institute Congressional Program discussion, according to Carnegie Corporation staff. Despite

occasional partisan positions, they note remarkably nonpartisan dialogue on critical issues. One especially powerful political conversion occurred with voting day coming up, when a member of Congress made an impassioned speech not to allow election rhetoric to drive lawmakers apart and damage an historic opportunity on education reform legislation. The Congressman acknowledged to his colleagues during the education seminar that he “came in as a doubter... and really discovered common ground.” This sentiment was repeated, albeit less dramatically, during other conference sessions.

The Backstory

As a Senator, Dick Clark possessed the rare background (a Ph.D. in Russian History) to fully digest U.S.-Soviet issues. But he was stunned to find many of his colleagues lacked the necessary expertise to deal with these issues of “overwhelming importance to Cold War American policy.” With wide-ranging responsibilities in both domestic and foreign policy, members had little opportunity to educate and inform themselves about this subject. In 1985, under the auspices of the Aspen Institute, Clark launched a series of conferences and breakfast meetings for Members of Congress on U.S.-Soviet relations. The project was designed to provide detailed information and analysis and to keep lawmakers abreast of major issues as they developed. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the focus shifted to Russia and the other successor republics and in the 1990s the program expanded further to include the struggling democracies in Eastern Europe. Initially, Carnegie Corporation provided the funding to transform Clark’s idea into reality, and that support has continued to this day.

When first approached about Aspen Institute conferences, Representative Obey thought it was “a hare-brained idea” to try and get members of Congress to commit to two lengthy program sessions a year,

but was willing to give it a try. Soon the hare-brained idea caught on, offering members of Congress a chance to escape for several days of in-depth policy discussion—bringing their spouses along as well, which made the program all the more appealing to the overscheduled lawmakers. “The presence of spouses adds to the success of the conferences,” suggests Fallon, “because members of Congress are less likely to engage in aggressive, estranging debate, and friendships among spouses easily cross party lines.”

The program’s startup happened to “coincide perfectly” Clark recalls, with the ascension of reform-minded leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow. Fueled by intellectual curiosity and placed in comfortable surroundings, the program has become an institution. In a city like Washington where change is a constant, the Aspen Institute Russia Program stands out. The twenty-fourth session will take place in the summer of 2007.

Aspen Institute’s Education Program can be traced back to the Carnegie-funded project “Our Children’s Future,” initiated by Florida Senator Lawton Chiles in 1989. After being administered by the Urban Institute for several years, the program was taken over in 1993 by Aspen Institute’s Dick Clark, who had been an advisor to the program. Under Senator Clark’s direction, conferences have been held on such issues as children and violence, the challenge of parenting in the 90s and pathways to adult success for all youth. The focus eventually shifted to emphasize America’s educational system, exploring effective policies leading to successful reforms.

Vartan Gregorian was president of Carnegie Corporation when the Aspen Institute received its first Education Program grant of \$400,000 in 1999. At that time, Gregorian reassessed the Corporation’s substantial investment in the Congressional Program and deemed it a highly worthwhile endeavor that, in his words, “offers national leaders an unparalleled opportunity to meet with scholars on critical international and domestic issues and to have the time to think through new policy options.” Gregorian has since attended the Aspen Institute Congressional Programs annually.

Although the Russia and Education programs deal with disparate issues, they share an operating formula Clark instituted at the very beginning and has honed over the years. At the heart of Clark’s approach is a carefully controlled ideological balance. While he laments the fact that one can never really achieve perfect parity, Clark aims for as even a mix as possible of Republicans and Democrats, members of the House and Senate, female and male legislators. He feels it is also particularly important on educational issues to ensure participation by African-American and Hispanic lawmakers representing inner-city communities affected by the topics under discussion.

Occasionally, the balancing act can be undone by the unpredictability of the congressional schedule. In 1993, the Senate was kept in session during the summer, “so we had only House members,” Clark recalls. Legislators do try to clear their calendars for Aspen Institute Congressional Programs, however, and the program is now well known enough, he notes, that members of Congress approach him for invitations. Many times he’s had to “cut off” the attendees list when RSVPs exceeded the maximum number the budget or facility could support. One legislator, who found himself shut out after responding too late, instructed his staff that henceforth all Aspen Institute invitations are to be brought to him immediately, Clark reports.

Some lawmakers who request a repeat visit receive a polite rejection. It’s a good idea to take an active interest in the discussion if you want to return, Clark advises. He has vetoed members of Congress “who were just a little too weak...really couldn’t contribute much—and I didn’t think they came away with much.” Fortunately, it’s not a large group. “I could almost name them on my 10 fingers,” he says. One way to be sure of not getting invited back is to neglect to file a disclosure form with the House or Senate ethics body—especially since the Aspen Institute Congressional Program gives each participant a list of their paid expenses for this purpose. Clark is adamant about avoiding any impression of flouting congressional ethics rules.

A number of influential lawmakers are not only regulars, they participate in both the U.S.-Russian and the Education programs. These include Senator Richard Lugar and Representatives George Miller, David Obey and Henry Waxman. Lugar was Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman until the Republicans lost control of Congress. Obey is chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Miller heads Education and Labor and Waxman chairs the Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

The Aspen Institute Congressional Program's immersion offers many advantages over the way issues are discussed in Congress, these leaders contend. It's a "hell of a lot better than a hearing," declares Obey. On Capitol Hill, witnesses come with prepared statements and "you get all of five minutes to ask questions," he says. In contrast, at the Aspen Institute Congressional Program, "you get to ask a question; you have plenty of opportunities to get together." Miller describes daily life on Capitol Hill as a series of schedules "cut up in 25-minute segments for conferences and hearings." But at an Aspen Institute Congressional Program conference "you get a chance to really think about the nuances, the ramifications of policy."

Keeping Ideas Moving

One of the program's great strengths is Dick Clark's well-practiced approach. He keeps the talk flowing as he guides the discussion from the center of a horseshoe-shaped table. Wearing a microphone, he's been described by participants as playing roles from Ted Koppel to ringmaster. But there's no doubt the discussion is "very carefully choreographed," one observer notes. Speaking time, whether for a question, answer or comment, is divided precisely into three-minute blocks, enforced by a timer. Participants are placed in a queue for speaking by raising one finger, and can break the queue for a timely observation by raising two fingers.

Scholars, both U.S. academics and for-

eign experts, are major players at Aspen Institute Congressional Programs, both in their presentations and their involvement in informal discussions. The information they provide can alter the perspective of some of the most influential policymakers in the country. For example, one Russian scholar gave a very "sobering" view of Russia's perspective on the country's relationship with the U.S., notes Deana Arsenian. When American lawmakers "expected a sense of gratitude" from Russia for allocating huge sums to help Russia toward democracy, instead they got a lesson in Russian political reality. The speaker bluntly told them the U.S. "is not really instrumental" to Russia in determining domestic policy.

"They give a different flavor to the debate than you normally get in Congress, where hearings feature self-proclaimed experts," notes Senator Bennett. Yet there is one limiting factor in providing the totality of the Russian view: foreign scholars need to speak English well enough to participate in the program.

Private conversations with scholars are strongly encouraged. Clark delivers the polite charge to experts to "please be available" for further conversation during free time. The results of these exchanges can be highly positive. In fact, Representative Ralph Regula used his contact with a University of Washington scholar to help him set up a specialized in-depth political science program at a small college in his home area in Ohio. "I wouldn't have had a chance at all for that kind of experience" without the Aspen Institute Congressional Program, Regula says.

Members of Congress applaud the huge differences between Congressional Program conferences and Washington-based formal congressional travel delegations, known as "Codels," where their activities are scheduled and escorted by embassy staff. "It's so much better than a Codel" where "much of your time is spent on rather stiff conversation," Obey says. At Aspen Institute "you get a chance to deal with issues," he notes, "and then you talk more over dinner." Fallon feels that dinner conversations are important "because the

informality allows members of Congress to illustrate their concerns for policy with the personal anecdotes that affect their lives and political orientation and thus connect more directly with the research findings brought by the experts.”

Travel Controversies

Lavish trips such as the highly publicized Scottish golf outings connected with lobbyist Jack Abramoff have affected how even non-partisan congressional travel is viewed. Travel has become such a controversial issue that Aspen Institute Congressional Program invitations include a printed copy of the Ethics Committee ruling that clarifies how the trip conforms to official congressional travel rules.

The conferences are held outside the country, Clark explains, precisely because of those ethics rules, which don't allow members of Congress to take subsidized trips within the U.S. that are longer than three days. Sometimes more time actually costs less, according to Clark. After trying a three-day education conference format, he found adding a fourth day provided greater financial and intellectual value. “For a little more money, you get a fourth more time,” he says, which is “much more efficient for the foundation and for us.”

In addition to housing and meals, the program pays coach class airfare for each lawmaker and spouse or guest. Husbands and wives are the secret weapon in Clark's arsenal, helping to maintain civility and promote attendance. Spouse participation has always been an integral part of the Congressional Program strategy — a lure to persuade members to make time for the conferences. In the early days, Representative Obey recalls, after he advised Clark it was “crazy” to seek such time-consuming commitments from busy members of Congress, Clark countered, “There's one incentive: You can bring your spouse and the conferences will be held at a very nice place.” Members of Congress don't get a lot of time to themselves, Obey points out, and “if you're being asked to take five days and focus on a subject, you may not want to do it. But,” he adds, “if it is a nice place and your

wife can come, that makes it more appealing.”

Roughly 90 percent of spouses attend Aspen Institute Congressional Programs, in Deana Arsenian's estimation. But the prospect of a luxurious getaway with spouse in tow might also detract from the serious image that the Aspen Institute wants to convey. The Education Program, in particular, must deal with the possibility of appearing to be a luxury junket because it takes place in the winter at a resort location such as Puerto Rico, Jamaica or Mexico.

One honest response to any criticism is that lawmakers and panelists simply wouldn't attend if the trips weren't in appealing places. “They're not going to go to the Bronx,” Representative Regula remarks. Although the Aspen Institute Congressional Program has attracted the attention of the press and the Center For Public Integrity watchdog group for its role as in sponsoring congressional travel, Clark's explanation of the nonpartisan nature and heavy work schedule of a Congressional Program trip is generally accorded a great deal of respect.

The program is “very clean,” According to Clark. He points to the Aspen Institute Congressional Program as a rare travel and learning opportunity with “no specific interest in a private goal.” Media coverage of the Program's congressional trips have acknowledged as much. The Associated Press led one congressional travel story last year by pointing to the Congressional Program's heavy work agenda: “The 17 members of Congress who went to Dublin, Ireland, on an Aspen Institute Congressional Program-paid trip last summer got a walking tour of the city. They also spent six or seven hours each of the four days in discussions with scholars and policymakers about U.S. relations with Europe and Russia. It was not quite the same as the itinerary for trips arranged by disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, when golf at St. Andrews' famed course in Scotland was the highlight,” the AP article noted.

Congressional Program veterans seem unfazed by potential criticism of these trips. To Senator Bennett, it is “completely transparent. . . . Everybody knows what they're doing. . . .so there are no apologies.” A more fiery

response comes from Obey: “There will always be idiots who foul the nest,” he declares, referring to Abramoff. But trips such as Abramoff’s should not be mentioned in the same breath as the “very different” Aspen Institute, he says, terming the program “the gold standard... in how private travel ought to be handled.”

He blames misunderstandings on some reporters who don’t distinguish between lobbyist or special interest-paid travel and travel for the purpose of study. Obey’s colleague from the other side of the aisle is just as adamant. “I can defend what I’ve done and will continue to defend it,” declares Republican Regula, who has told House colleagues considering travel ethics legislation they “shouldn’t restrict trips with Aspen Institute because they are nonpartisan.”

Unlike scholars, legislators are not widely encouraged to take time for reflection or educational travel – and their understanding of issues and ability to make wise decisions may suffer as a result. Carnegie Corporation supports Aspen Institute Congressional Programs because of their nonpartisan nature, because they are consistent with the Corporation’s mission, which is to promote knowledge and understanding, and because they carefully observe regulations designed to ensure fair play. The stringent rules governing the Program — starting with the invitation, which pointedly states participation is required for “duration” of the conference — should insulate it from major criticism, Clark believes. Because he is very explicit about that requirement, members almost never leave early. “If they’re there and we paid for it, I expect them to attend all sessions,” he stresses. One legislator who skipped discussions to play tennis one morning was never invited back.

Low profile, high impact

One of the program’s true strengths highly praised by attendees is that discussion sessions are deliberately off the record. “Nothing is reported, nothing is written

about the meeting. It really is a venue for them to have a discussion with no strings attached and without publicity,” says Deana Arsenian. For dissemination purposes, a published summary of the experts’ presentations is prepared following each meeting. For the Education Program, Carol Copple, publications editor for the National Association for the Education of Young Children serves as rapporteur. Carnegie staff set the meeting agenda and select the experts in consultation with Dick Clark. For the U.S.-Russia Program, Michael Mandelbaum, Christian A. Herter Professor of American Foreign Policy at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. and associate director of the Aspen Institute Congressional Project on American Relations with the Former Communist World helps set the meeting agenda and acts as rapporteur.

“We are not making speeches to our special interest constituents or to a CSPAN audience or individual lobbyist...hanging on every word,” explains Representative Waxman. “It’s an off-the-record discussion and it’s much more collegial.” As a result, surprising views surface in private sessions. Behind closed doors, people frequently take counter-intuitive positions, according to observers. A Midwestern Republican speaks up for bi-lingual education. Or a Republican from a conservative area of New England discourses on the importance of affirmative action—something they’d be very unlikely to do for the record.

Given the free exchange of ideas the Congressional Program generates, its impact is not unexpected. Yet because of tax laws restricting the role of charitable foundations, the Aspen Institute is cautious when it comes to pointing to the legislative impact of the Congressional Program. “That leads to implications we’re expecting something, and we don’t want to be charged with that or seen as advocates,” says Bill Nell, a key senior staffer for the program. Still, he sees an undeniable connection between what takes place at the Congressional Program and the passing of legislation.

Members of Congress can be quite clear about the Program's contributions to several pieces of landmark legislation in foreign policy and education. A prime example is the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Act — legislation designed to reduce dangers from Soviet-era weapons of mass destruction. The Cooperative Threat Reduction Program is one of the most, arguably, the most, important nuclear nonproliferation step taken by the world up to that point. According to the latest Nunn-Lugar Scorecard, since its 1991 inception the program has deactivated 6,760 nuclear warheads, destroyed 587 ballistic missiles, 483 ballistic missile silos, 150 bombers, 549 submarine-launched missiles, 789 nuclear air-to-surface missiles, 436 submarine missile launchers, and 28 strategic missile submarines. It has sealed 194 nuclear test tunnels and also helped more than 58,000 scientists formerly working on programs relating to weapons of mass destruction find employment in other fields.

These accomplishments have been achieved by establishing a cooperative presence in the former Soviet Union, where American firms carry out a large proportion of program-related work. A side benefit of the program has been the development of many and varied ties between Russian and U.S. military officials and government entities. "Much of the foundation work for the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Act occurred through Aspen Institute Congressional Programs," Senator Richard Lugar (an author of the law) noted in a letter to congressional ethics regulators.

Lugar credits interaction with "Russian members of parliament... Russian exiles and scholars gifted in nuclear technology proliferation and methodology," important contacts made at the conferences who offered "specific leadership entry to the most sensitive areas of former Soviet governance and the Russian successor state." Nunn-Lugar's impetus came straight from an Aspen Congressional Program meeting with former Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev, according to Obey, who was there. Russian officials concerned "about loose nuclear material wondered if there wasn't some way to help set up a system to help soak it up," he recalls. "That

conversation started the ball rolling." Soon after the legislators returned home, they started the process of appropriating funds to contain the deadly materials.

The Aspen Institute Education Program has yielded similarly impressive results. One dramatic example is the landmark No Child Left Behind legislation, which developed its roots at the Aspen Congressional Program conferences. Representative George Miller says the "intellectual underpinnings" of No Child Left Behind came from the Congressional Program, which in his opinion also had a huge impact on legislative outcomes in other areas. Miller ticks off examples: the Higher Education act and Secondary Education act, along with congressional action on school equity, bilingual education and diversity. Fallon notes that at the 2001 conference, Promoting Educational Excellence in the New Economy, Representative John Boehner attended and paid close attention because he had just unexpectedly become chair of the House Education and Labor Committee. In informal conversations over meals with the representative George Miller, the two members of Congress from different ends of the political spectrum began to see a framework that could lead to bipartisan support for what became No Child Left Behind.

The Aspen-aided Obey-Porter bill is regarded in Congress as a major piece of school reform legislation. Obey also cites his Aspen Institute-formed relationship with Ralph Regula on the subject of school principals. Regula is a former school principal turned Congressman whose basic mantra is that good principals make good schools. The Aspen Institute Congressional Program not only has furthered his legislative efforts to support school principals, but also has affected his views on funding—particularly his oversight of a \$60 billion budget for the Department of Education. He'd regularly bring back program papers for staff members. "You translate your ideas that you gain from these [Aspen Institute programs] into appropriations," Regular explains, "which [are] translated in to policy."

Even policy veterans in Congress say the conferences expose them to new viewpoints. For Henry Waxman,

the Congressional Program changed his thinking on NATO expansion. After many U.S.-Russia conferences, “it became clear to me that there is a serious problem in expanding NATO right up to the edge of Russia.” Russia views that as a hostile act. Yet the discussion in Congress “didn’t even talk about” this issue, Waxman says. “I formulated my opinion based on the Aspen Institute discussion and wish that more of my colleagues were able to hear those discussions.” Waxman is so struck by the format that he is considering experimenting with a similar retreat for the congressional committee he heads. “We could sit around a table as the Congressional Program does, where we look at and listen to each other,” he says.

Senator Bennett uncovered a potentially disastrous issue through his attendance at a Congressional Program conference: Russia’s dwindling population. This is “an area I paid no attention to whatsoever. I didn’t know how much demographic trouble the Russians are really in, until I went to Aspen Institute and one of the scholars talked about how the population in Russia is going to go down by half” if things don’t change. Such realizations dovetail with a major Carnegie Corporation goal: for congressional participants to build their intellectual capital with the best experts helping to inform their decision-making. The practical implications of this type of transformative discussion are critical in the Corporation’s view.

While informed discussion may be an end in itself, moving the agenda forward is the program’s ultimate objective. One innovation aimed at achieving practical results came at the suggestion of Carnegie Corporation president Vartan Gregorian. He stipulated that the session’s last 45 minutes be limited to members of Congress discussing the policy implications of the issues at hand—which prevents lengthy discussion about a problem or phenomenon that fails to connect with applicable policy.

Aspen Institute Congressional Programs are held annually, but the policy flame they ignite is kept alight throughout the year. The conferences are supplemented

by regular congressional breakfasts, which also follow the precise Clark formula of pithy presentations followed by congressional Q and A. According to Clark, the breakfasts serve as a recruiting tool to whet interest in the annual conferences. They help maintain momentum, while wielding their own legislative impact at the same time.

For example, the groundbreaking “Open World” Russian Leadership Program was launched after a powerful senator acted on suggestions made by Librarian of Congress James Billington, a leading American scholar on Russian history and culture, at an Aspen Institute breakfast presentation, Arsenian recalls. Billington advised “the best thing the U.S. can do in terms of improving relations with Russia” would be to bring in a group of Russians “to expose them to the American way of thinking” she says. Senator Ted Stevens, then chairman of the Appropriations Committee, was present at the breakfast and was moved to sponsor legislation that set up a U.S.-Russia exchange. Since then the United States Congress has authorized the Library of Congress (which now runs the program in partnership with the National Peace Foundation) to invite emerging Russian political leaders to be hosted in cities and communities throughout the United States annually in order to gain significant firsthand experience on how American democracy works and how American citizens conduct their daily lives.

The Future

The Carnegie Corporation-funded Aspen Institute Congressional Program is expected to play a role in several pieces of upcoming legislation, according to influential members of Congress. The No Child Left Behind law that was spurred by the Education Program may again benefit from its in-depth bipartisan discussions. The February 2007 Education Program theme deliberately concentrated on the upcoming debate on reauthorization of this legislation. Because of that focus, House

Education Committee chairman Miller believes the Congressional Program's discussions "will be a major force on the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind."

Internationally, the U.S.-Russia Program may well stimulate action to change a law that's been on the books for decades. Waxman predicts Congress will likely vote to repeal the Cold War "Jackson-Vanik" restrictions preventing Russia from having normal trade status — and the Aspen Institute Congressional Program has influenced the debate. Jackson-Vanik gave the U.S. effective leverage on human rights issues when, for example, Soviet Jews were not allowed to emigrate, Waxman says. But Congressional Program presentations have illustrated that now "we are beyond the need" for such tight trade law restrictions. These meetings helped "lay the groundwork" for what he predicts will be extending unconditional or permanent normal trade relations to Russia in the near future.

The scope of the Aspen Institute's international policy discussion has been revamped, resulting in a broadened vision of the Russia Program that includes discussion of the vital European role. Appropriately, the current title is U.S.-Russia-Europe Cooperative Efforts — an improvement in Waxman's view. As he points out, "The consequences of U.S.-Russia relations are not just restricted to our two countries." For example, he cites one "very ominous concern" in the future: that Russia might use its natural resources as "political weapons." According to Arsenian, "the aim of the expanded effort is to determine where U.S., Russian and European interests converge and where they diverge." In fact, the final remarks at the latest conference in August 2006 were on "Closing the Gap in U.S.-Europe Relations."

The Aspen Institute Congressional Program agenda has evolved to the discussion of such security issues as non-proliferation, terrorism, regional security, European Union and NATO expansion. One potential flashpoint in the future flagged by Russia expert Michael Mandelbaum is Iran's nuclear activity. Along with NATO expansion, this volatile issue is "particularly neuralgic for Washington and Moscow," Mandelbaum wrote in his

summary. This document was widely circulated after the conference, as are various scholarly papers that are made available in congressional and academic communities to assure that the impact of every Congressional Program conference reaches beyond the small group of attendees.

Despite the generally laudatory comments about the program, there is still room for improvement. One weakness in simply publishing the papers is that they do not accurately reflect the debate that takes place at the conference—an intentional omission aimed at encouraging attendees, especially politicians, to speak freely. Some thought has been given to solving this problem in a way that could allow for free conference debate while giving interested outsiders a better understanding of the tenor of the discussion. One possibility might be to include remarks without attribution, as has been tried with some past Congressional Program publications.

Another concern is that the U.S.-Russia Program has not invited new participants—perhaps because some key senators have resisted attempts to bring newcomers into the conference. At the same time, a Russia caucus has not emerged in Congress as result of the Aspen Institute Congressional Program conference, which disappoints Arsenian. It has also been suggested that the Education Program could use added voices, as well as a greater variety among participants. After a recent Education Reform Program, one member of Congress noted afterward "it might have helped to have a superintendent or two plus a principal and union leader to provide perspective."

"A little better marketing" of the conference might attract a new group of legislative participants, suggests Senator Bennett. There is "no question" in his mind that the program could benefit "from a different crowd. . . ." We see too many of the same faces, he says, contrasting this case to the "great job" done in rotating scholars. "We don't see the same scholars over and over again."

That issue also concerns Dick Clark. Although 310 members of Congress, 182 international parliamentarians and more than 700 experts and scholars have been

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involved in the program thus far, he's always on the lookout for "new blood." Clark hopes to land younger, influential members of Congress in the near future. So far, one young senator in particular has eluded him. Clark has actively tried, but thus far has been unable to convince Barack Obama to participate in a Congressional Program conference. On the Republican side, he's unsuccessfully tried to woo potential presidential aspirant Senator Chuck Hagel.

Still, there is little doubt that members of Congress, including some of the most powerful, view the Congressional Program conferences as critical to America's legislative process. Indeed, Obey cites the program's influence in a new book. "I devoted the better part of a chapter to the role that the Aspen Institute conferences played in my life on Capitol Hill," he says.

The Aspen Institute Congressional Program has been such a political force that there is particular concern about continuing them in the future. Former Senator Dick Clark, the driving force behind the program, is in his upper 70's and contemplating retirement sometime down the road. The program has been wrapped up in his personality, congressional connections and moderating skill for 20-plus years. He has virtually patented the conference operating formula.

Could the program survive the loss of Clark? While a search committee for his successor has been formed, for now Clark says he hasn't even thought of missing a single conference. He notes that his staff was entirely trained by him and, with tenure of between 10 and 20 years, is highly experienced at putting together conferences. That being said, Dick Clark is "really the glue that holds it all together," according to Representative Waxman. "He's respected by everybody. He does a superb job in preparing the conferences, in handling the discussions. He's going to be very hard to replace."

Written by: Lee Michael Katz. Katz is a D.C.-based writer who has decades of experience covering domestic and foreign policy issues in Washington and all over the world.



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