Miami Conference: Concluding Remarks, Summer 1997

My position at this point in the conference is a lot like that of the preacher who was asked to give a blessing before dinner in a crowd of hungry impatient people. Figuring that he’d better wind it up in a hurry, he gave the blessing “good food, good meat, good God, let’s eat.” I’ll try to speak in that spirit to the thirsty and the impatient.

- Rather than say more about the papers—all excellent—I want to reflect a little on the conference and to celebrate it in the context of our ongoing business of studying Congress.

- In his essay on legislatures in the Handbook of Political Science, Nelson Polsby described our enterprise this way. “Political science is a hybrid discipline. It takes its agenda from the world of politics as well as the world of theory.” He wanted to emphasize—as I do—the degree to which we are attached to the world of politics.

- The conference and its agenda display both characteristics. It has been stimulated by an event in the world of politics—the historic 1994 election for the House—and Republican take-over after 40 years. Papers have tried on for size the
variety of theorizing that we have found helpful in studying the Congress--contextual theory, modernism theory, principal agent theory, conditional party government theory, learning theory, etc.

- We have taken the 104th Congress to be an important 40-year phenomenon. But this is my point: so, too, can we take the political science study of Congress to be an important 40-year phenomenon. In reading the papers and listening to the discussion, I'm struck by how much we know about Congress and how capable we are of making general sense out of a new event in the real political world. And how much we have to say about the conference's theme, i.e., the impact of an event on the status quo. As CP say, the 104th is a gift to political science; and I am struck by the ability of the author to take full advantage of it. These capacities didn't come over night.

- Think of the conference from a 40-year perspective. The last time the Republicans controlled the House, we know, was the 83rd Congress--1953-1955. Suppose political scientists had been asked to write a set of papers--and from a different perspective--on our subject "The Impact of the New Majority: Republican Rule in the 83rd Congress." What would they have
written? Who would have come to the conference? Outside of the employees of the Congressional Research Service, there were few, if any, specialists on the U.S. Congress. Students of American politics whose work touched on Congress, but that’s all. And the best of those—Woodrow Wilson—was not available! My point is that 40 years ago we could not have had a conference like this. We didn’t know enough about the workings of this institution, what questions to ask about it, or how to begin generalizing about it. So, to this old hand anyway, this conference reminds me of how far we’ve come in 40 years. We’ve made better progress than the Republicans, and so we’ve been loaded for bear and waiting for the Republicans when they finally get around to putting themselves under our collective nose. When this event occurred, we were ready for it. This conference proves it.

To reflect a little more on where we might be in our 40-year journey and how the conference might relate to that journey, we could (and I will!) divide the 40-year period into two periods: overlapping as several people pointed out—like techtonic plates—but maybe distinctive enough to talk about. The first period would include the 50’s, 60’s and part of the 70’s. The second from the mid 70’s to the present.
The first period was a time of discovery, of getting acquainted with the post World War II Congress, of mapping the territory, of identifying the variables that needed to be understood. We learned a lot about the working parts of the institution, committees, parties, leaders, staff, their relationship with one another, the rules that impacted their relationships. Who the members were, where they came from, what they did, what the outside influences were like, i.e., electorates, interest groups, bureaucrats. And we learned about these things using a variety of methods: case studies of how a bill became a law, statistical analyses of electoral results and voting patterns, interviews with committee members and party leaders and staffers.

It was a massive descriptive effort, with some effort to explain the relationships we discovered. And it was an effort that very much reflected the world outside and the world inside Congress. In the 50's and 60's, the world outside was pretty stable and the world inside the Congress was pretty stable, too. Inside, we had the go-along, get-along Congress, insulated from change outside. Our explanation and our theorizing tended to center on how things fit together, and tended toward finding and explaining stable patterns of activity. It was as if the world and Congress itself stood...
still sufficiently for us to do our mapping job without giving a lot of attention to change. Reform was on our minds, but not as the object of study, but as a prescriptive matter, as our wish list—which even emphasized more the stability of the institution—its resistance to change.

Anyway, the idea here is that for the first period of research, 50's and 60's, several conditions obtained. (1) The political world out of Congress was stable. (2) The activities of Congress reflected that outside stability. (3) Political science research on Congress reflected congressional stability. (4) Political science research was centered around a large descriptive effort.

- So, in the 50's, 60's and 70's, our research agenda did reflect the world of politics as Polsby reports. In the late 60's and early 70's, the world of politics changed in a major way. I don’t need to rehash the political changes that accompanied Viet Nam, Watergate and the various movements—for women, for civil rights, for the environment, for consumers. And for us political scientists, the same four conditions for the first period shaped our agenda. That is: (1) The political world outside Congress was changing rapidly. (2) The activities of Congress reflected those outside changes. (3)

Miami Conference, Summer 1997-5
Political science research agenda focused on these changes on the activities of Congress. Another massive descriptive effort was required. The policy agenda had changed; the independence of the members had changed; the rules and relationships among committees, parties and leaders had changed; the make-up of the Democratic caucus had changed; electoral and representational relationships had changed. And our explanation of what we found had to include explaining change—as never before. Reform was now something we had to describe and explain. It was not a descriptive, not a prescriptive matter. It had happened. We didn’t stop asking questions of stability, but we got much more interested in change. Our theories focused less on the stability of groups and more on the individual—the ambitious entrepreneur pushing change, for example—more historical research, more attention to context and changing contexts. But because of the work of the first period, we had a baseline against which to think about and measure change. So we—Roger, Barbara, Ron—could compare this post-reform Congress with the pre-reform Congress.

So we come to our conference here, which has as its central subject: change, “the impact” of change—how much impact of change, of what sort, how permanent, with what consequences.

Miami Conference, Summer 1997-6
And we’ve been asking all day in the context of the two periods I’ve discussed, whether or not we might be looking at another distinctive period of congressional research—something like the 70's, and whether or what we are doing here is extending the line of research and body of research we have developed in the 70's, 80's and pre-1994. There are some similarities with the swing period of the 70's. For one thing, a lot of people used the word “revolution” to describe what has happened. If we think of the conditions I talked about earlier, there certainly has been change in the outside world of technology, communication and global economy. (1.) The increasing persuasiveness and, perhaps, dominance of a free market, smaller government, conservative ideology in American politics. (2.) Massive partisan realignment in the south (83rd--6; 104th--69 southern Republicans). (3.) There was the new Republican House majority—the “revolution,” earthquake.

Certainly those outside changes get reflected in the internal changes we’ve talked about. The conservative southerners captured the Republican caucus much as the liberals captured the Democratic caucus in 70's. The “Contract” babies injected the same reformist spirit, new ambitions as Watergate babies. Party arrangements and rules were changed by the new

Miami Conference, Summer 1997-7
majority. And in all of this, one new variable came to a new importance—the old minority party of 40 years. At the very least, the 104th Congress prodded students of Congress with one more large descriptive effort—and that effort may well match that of the earlier periods. On the evidence of the papers, it is, at best, too early to tell whether we are coming into a distinctive period of research or not. On balance, it seems we are not. The 100 days were not the post 100 days. The potential for revolution looks less now than it did in November, December and January. The 105th is not the 104th Congress. On the other hand, political science research always lags behind the events that stimulates it.

The question: whether research triggered by the Republican take-over will take us along well traveled paths or toward something recognizably different—remains to be answered. The conference has left it up in the air, but it has encouraged us to describe normalcy. If things return to normalcy, what was abnormal? Where do we go from here. Certainly the conference speaks for itself and doesn’t need to be pigeonholed. And new majority-old minority will do what it will. Let me stop with one final word—from an old hand—the spirit of the conference it seems to me has been the same as every other Congress-centered conference I’ve ever been to—in the 60's,

Miami Conference, Summer 1997-8
70's and 80's. "A group of friends." That spirit is one that sees legislative research as a common enterprise in which every researcher is assumed to be contributing something to our understanding of the institution and its world, no matter what the subject matter focus, theory or method. Everybody is encouraged to play. It’s a community of scholars among whom there is a great deal of mutual respect. That’s why we’ve made such great strides—a model of normal science. For that spirit, the sponsors of the conference should take a lot of credit. And I think I speak for all of us when I say thank you to Colton and Nicol for the intellectual congeniality of our time here and for proving once again what a fascinating subject we study and how much can be gained through mutual respect and common effort.