SCORPIONS IN A JAR

Mister President, on that I ask for the yeas and nays.” “Is there a sufficient second? There appears to be a sufficient second. The yeas and nays are ordered. The clerk will call the roll.”

These final words calling for a vote on the Senate floor have been uttered by the presiding officer, from a chair that oversees the entire Senate chamber. If someone were watching the proceedings on C-SPAN or from the small visitors’ gallery above the chamber, they would see a puzzlingly empty spectacle. In most cases, only a few senators are on the floor, having spoken while standing behind one of a hundred desks that form a semicircle in front of the elevated platform where the stiff, seemingly bored presiding officer sits behind a parliamentarian, two legislative clerks, and a journal clerk. With that, those observing might be forgiven for thinking that the debate they have just witnessed was nothing more than kabuki, a pantomime of stilted, false formality played out to deaf ears, as unheard and unremarkable as a tree falling in an empty forest.
But in almost every Senate office, indeed at almost every desk, the television sets and computer monitors are on, having followed the floor statements that precede the vote. And much more has been done, well before the speeches began. Committee hearings have been held. Memos have been written. Recommendations have been drafted. Discussions and internal debates have taken place. All that remains is for the individual senator to decide which way he or she will vote. And within fifteen or twenty minutes, depending on the rule attached to the legislation, that vote must be cast personally, a yea or nay offered to the roll clerk sitting just below the presiding officer.

Some votes are easy, either because they are perfunctory, such as judicial and military nominations that have already been extensively scrubbed by trusted committee chairmen, or because they are procedural, calling upon a senator’s loyalty to the party leadership, or because the philosophical arguments are clear. Some votes are enormously difficult. Many involve great stakes for the nation on issues that are far more complex than the inconclusive legislative answers that are being offered, a dilemma that many senators identify as “letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.” Others involve deliberate traps by clever members of the opposing side, meaningless in their true impact because of procedural gimmickry but designed to soil the voting record of senators up for reelection and to provide fresh fodder for the bombast of the talk-show crowd. Casting such “gotcha” votes, one cannot help but think of Rudyard Kipling’s knowing lament in the classic poem “If”: “If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken / Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools . . .”

I am a junior senator, ninety-fifth on the seniority list, and so by Senate standards my office in the Russell Senate Office Building is less than splendid. But having spent most of my life outside of government, I know what splendid is, and how much it usually costs if you’re paying for it out of your own pocket. From that perspective, my office meets the test—the high ceiling, the ancient fireplace along one wall, the classic furniture, the modern technology evident in the top-of-the-line computer on my desk, all bought and maintained with money that came from hardworking people who have paid for such emoluments through their taxes. And especially splendid, invisible but permeating, is the history that both haunts and inspires me every day. It is not always enjoyable to serve as a United States senator. But it never ceases to be an honor.

Members of my legislative staff, led by the legislative director, enter my personal office to go over the vote and to discuss other possible votes for the day. I sit on a hard-back, wooden-armed chair, facing them as they take their usual seats on the sofa that meets the wall. Above the sofa is a large print of George Washington in military uniform, kneeling in prayer next to his horse at Valley Forge during the Revolutionary War. The print is a personal possession. I brought it to the office when I entered the Senate, as one of a host of reminders designed to focus my sense of purpose as I carry out my duties. Samuel Cochran, one of my four times great-grandfathers, served in the Virginia Line as an enlisted soldier under General Washington. He crossed the Delaware under Washington’s command. And Samuel Cochran was no “summer soldier”: apropos
of the scene in the painting, he kept the faith with Washington and suffered through the infamous winter at Valley Forge.

Across the room, amid a wall full of family pictures behind my desk, my mother’s father, B. H. Hodges, stares out at me from a small picture framed in barn wood, as he has done in every office I have occupied for more than twenty years. My grandfather is just in from his patch of truck farm vegetables, wearing knee-high working boots and bib overalls. A cloth hat is pulled low over his ears to protect him from the scorching east Arkansas sun, which has already baked his face tobacco brown. The hat’s brim is bent up in front, which along with his burning eyes gives him a defiant air. Defiant he was, and tragic, too. He was a fighter, a lonely champion of lost causes who himself lost everything because of the causes he championed. The picture doesn’t show it, but he is lame from a busted hip, with a longtime wound that still seeps openly through breaks in his skin, and will soon die for lack of medical care.
Pictures and reminders fill my office. Samuel Cochran, B. H. Hodges, my parents, my wife, my brother and sisters, my fellow Marines from a time of brutal combat in Vietnam, my five children and one stepdaughter; those who went before me, those who were young with me and grew older by my side, and those who will be here long after I am gone. They look over my shoulder as I work. They give me balance, and also a sense of accountability. I owe those who went before me the kind of country they fought to create and wanted to perfect. I owe those who served alongside me the kind of country we tried to protect. And I owe my children the kind of country they want to see preserved and further greatened.

I have a world-class staff, made up of men and women who represent every aspect of American society, capable of researching and debating any issue that confronts our country. I know they are world-class because I personally interviewed and hired every one of them, after sorting for months through hundreds of talent-filled applications. The memos have been prepared by whichever staff member is responsible for the subject matter of the vote. On the more important votes, we will already have had numerous discussions. On every vote, I have received and considered their recommendations. On every issue, the approach I have demanded is that my staff focus on substance over politics. And on matters of substance, I have required that they focus on societal fairness above all else. I ask a series of questions about the issues embodied in the legislation. On the more complicated votes, I may ask them to debate the matter in front of me. And then it is time to vote.

A typical day in the Senate requires several trips to the Senate floor and back, although the journey is usually underground so that on some days once I arrive at work I never see the sun. I walk fast. I have an aversion to wasting time. My sense of constant motion is one of the reasons that my eldest daughter, Amy, nicknamed me “the Tasmanian Devil” when she was in her teens. Given the efficiency of my pace, it takes about five minutes to reach the Senate chamber from my office. Normally, I do so through a connecting corridor that begins in the basement of the Russell Building, passing underneath Constitution Avenue and ending up in the basement of the Capitol. If time is short, I can also catch the train—a small tram located in the same tunnel that shuttles continuously back and forth between the two buildings. Years ago, when I was serving as Assistant Secretary of Defense and then Secretary of the Navy in the Pentagon, I calculated that I had walked more than a thousand miles along the maze of corridors between my office and Secretary of Defense Cap Weinberger’s. I have no doubt that I will surpass that mileage well before my Senate term expires.

I have lived a fairly complicated life, filled with unpredicted twists and turns. A phrase in “Gerontion,” one of T. S. Eliot’s greatest poems, frequently returns to my consciousness when I consider that journey: “History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors / and issues . . . Think, now!”

From the time I left the Marine Corps after serving as an infantry platoon and company commander in Vietnam, I decided that I would focus on immediate goals that inspired
me to devote all of my energy to them, rather than putting together the more cautious and traditional building blocks of a predictable career. I’ve worked in government, first in the late 1970s when I was the youngest full committee counsel in the Congress, then in the 1980s as a Defense Department official, and now as a senator. I’ve written nine books, six of them novels, a process that allowed me to spend considerable time overseas and also among widely varying communities here in America as I researched and wrote. I’ve taught literature at the university level. I’ve worked on numerous film projects, some of them with Hollywood’s top producers and directors. I’ve traveled widely as a journalist, writing from such locations as Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand. In addition to fighting in Vietnam, I’ve covered two wars—the Marines in Beirut for PBS in 1983, and then as an embedded journalist in Afghanistan in 2004. I’ve worked as a business consultant in Asia.

Financially and personally, my life has been one roll of the dice after another. I’ve had good years and bad years, but I’ve never lost my willingness to take a risk and I’ve never been bored. My curiosities have taken me down some pretty strange alleyways, to some of the darker, meaner corners of the world. And in that respect, when it comes to examining many of the issues of the day I have brought to the Senate a different set of experiences, and thus a different referent, from most of my colleagues. At the same time, I will admit that I acquired a certain level of cynicism along the way when it comes to the glitter- and-tinsel side of government and the trappings of power. And coming to the Senate after so many real-world, nonpolitical experiences, I will also admit that this well-honed skepticism is largely intact.

But the one connecting dot in all of my experiences has been a passion for history and a desire to learn from it. Not the enumeration of monarchs and treaties that so often passes for academic knowledge, but the surging vitality from below that so often impels change and truly defines cultures. The novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote vividly about war and peace, showing us the drawing rooms and idiosyncrasies of Russia’s elite. But in reality, he was telling us that great societal changes are most often pushed along by tsunami-deep impulses that cause the elites to react far more than they inspire them to lead. And this, in my view, is the greatest lesson of political history. Entrenched aristocracies, however we may want to define them, do not want change; their desire instead is to manage dissent in a way that does not disrupt their control. But over time, under the right system of government, a free, thinking people has the energy and ultimately the power to effect change.

The American experiment, incomplete as it is in its evolution, is the greatest example of the possibility of balancing these two competing impulses. We ebb and flow, decade after decade, as the better minds among us seek to define the playing field of American success. And we are engaging in this debate, as best we can, under the principles of true representative government.

This leads me, perhaps surprisingly, to my innate distrust of the ornaments of power, because even an earned skepticism has its limits. If one has a sense of history and
cares for the place of the United States of America as a unique, enduring model of the benefits of democracy, no amount of cynicism can diminish the largeness, and even the greatness, that surrounds you when you walk the hallways and enter the chambers of the Capitol. Indeed, even when viewed from the outside landscape the Capitol dominates Washington, rising with an austere grandness above the skyline, and lit with a glowing majesty at night. The Capitol, quite frankly, humbles me, and for me it is a particular privilege to walk unescorted and unchallenged along its corridors.

Still walking, I reach the far end of the tunnel and ride an escalator up a floor, reaching the basement of the Capitol. From there I join several colleagues as we take one of the “Senators Only” elevators to the second floor. The elevator doors open. Almost as in a movie, I step from the solitude of the elevator into a scene of instant chaos. Dozens of senators have been exiting the four elevators that open at this narrow corridor. They must now pass through a thick crowd of journalists who have interposed themselves along the corridor, which leads to the doorways of the Senate chamber. The news reporters wave microphones and notebooks, calling out to different senators, wanting print or radio interviews regarding their positions on different pieces of legislation or the latest hot issue that faces the Congress. Mini press conferences are being held in tightly knit groups as I move toward the chamber.

Back in their home states, each of these senators would be unique, commanding the full attention of every reporter in the room. Here, the reporters flit from one small grouping to another, looking for a series of quick quotes, or the best quote, and having their pick of any senator who will stop for a moment and give them some time. But the senators know the game as well. On any given vote, on any given day, a smart senator who has taken a bold or controversial position can reach far more media outlets between the elevator and the Senate chamber than he or she could garner in a full press conference back home.

The doorway nearest the elevator opens into the Republican side of the Senate. I take a left turn in front of those doors, choosing not to enter them today, and walk along a side corridor that parallels the chamber, heading toward the Democratic side. Capitol police and floor assistants greet me as I pass. History surrounds me here. Those who have gone before us have left their mark, both visibly and spiritually. The beautifully colored tiles underneath my feet are muted with the passage of time, their patterns fading from the abrasion of a million footsteps. A wide bank of stairs falls to my left. Its marble steps are curved in the middle like mildly sagging cakes, the marble itself worn and polished from generation after generation of hard-soled shoes that have climbed them. The domed ceilings, the grand murals, the intricate, Renaissance-style artwork, the sculptured busts of great Americans, all surround me in this part of the Capitol. Their images are made more poignant by the whispered voices and echoing footsteps of others who are walking nearby in the hallway, reminding me that this is hallowed ground.

All of these feelings are accentuated when I enter the Senate chamber. The first time our newly elected group of senators was brought to the Senate floor, my good friend
Senator Jon Tester commented that the experience gave him the same feeling as walking into his barn back in Montana. At first some thought this observation cheeky, but instead it was profoundly respectful. Jon Tester’s great-grandfather built the barn.

His point was that he cannot enter it without thinking of his heritage, and of the efforts of those who went before him, from which he benefits every day as he works the farm. And so it is with the Senate chamber. It was conceived and built by ingenious leaders, and we are merely its latest set of temporary occupants, charged with the stewardship of our nation’s standards and its continuity. I will always be a guest here, no matter how long I might remain in the Senate. The Senate floor is and always has been the great arena of our democracy.

I spent eight years in my younger life as a boxer, and sometimes when I enter the chamber I think, This is the ring. The American people can see us here, and listen to our arguments. This is where the fights matter.

Traditions are preserved here: the somber aura of the chamber itself, the stilted phrasing of the parliamentary questions, the disingenuous but essential courtesies, the old-style furniture, the tobacco spittoons that remind us of other eras in our national journey, the names of those from far earlier times that have been carved by now-dead hands into the bottom compartments of the very desks we now occupy. This is a reminder for all of us, at the very moment of our greatest influence. Sit at your desk, open up the drawer, and stare directly not only into history but into the future, when you yourself will simply become a carved memory, even as the energy and the frustrations of the Senate and the nation move inexorably beyond your life.

I reach the entrance near the Democratic cloakroom, climbing two steps and heading toward a different set of double doors. They swing open as I near them, each door manned by a smiling, blue-suited page. I walk along a lush, royal-blue carpet past the rows of highly polished, old-school desks, stepping down from one wide platform to another until I am in the well, where I will cast my vote.

The Senate floor is alive now, dozens of senators milling about, buzzing with conversations. At the row of desks just below the presiding officer, off to his left, the roll clerk is calling the names, asking for the yeas and nays. Below the roll clerk in the well itself, the senators are milling around two separate tables. On the Democratic side, just in front of the majority leader’s desk, two cloakroom aides sit behind one table, tallying votes. On the table are a summary of the amendment being voted on, a copy of the amendment itself, and a note giving the leaders’ recommendation on the vote. A similar table sits just in front of the Republican leader’s desk, providing their own aides and summaries.

I look around at my fellow senators, part of me again wondering at the unplanned personal journey that brought me here, and part of me surprised at how comfortable I have become in their midst. They are an eclectic bunch, this so-called Debating Club. More than a few harbor presidential aspirations. A large number are children of privilege, the product of great wealth and even of generations of ease and comfort. Many went to the best schools our nation has to offer. On the other hand, quite a few have reached
this political zenith through more plebeian routes. And I have no problem saying without hesitation that almost all of them have impressed me with their love of this country, and with their sincere desire to preserve its greatness.

That doesn’t mean that we are a big, happy family. Some of us believe that we were sent here to fix problems, and others believe that those who have come here to fix problems—at least the issues that we define as problems—are in fact the problem. So behind all the smiles and backslaps, and beyond the necessary courtesies that lend dignity to what otherwise would be a vulgar brawl, is the reality that in this room, right at this moment, are some of the shrewdest and most cunning creatures on earth.

There is an old joke that senators tell among themselves. Your first six months in the Senate, you spend a lot of time wondering how the hell you got here. After that, you look around at your colleagues and wonder how the hell any of them got here. But make no mistake—there are very few accidental senators. One might disagree with their priorities. Some might opine about which lobbyists and special-interest groups maintain a measure of influence over their political conduct. Others might dislike their personalities or criticize their ethical conduct. Every now and then, one of them suffers the misfortune of having their personal life spill over into the public consciousness, causing untold embarrassment. But at bottom these are people who have taken risks, exposed themselves to the public eye, and paid a certain price to reach the Senate floor. And one should never underestimate either their determination on matters that are
important to them, or their mental toughness. This is one of the great reasons for the elaborate courtesies that prevail on the Senate floor, and for the careful respect that is shown even to those with whom you adamantly disagree or even secretly dislike. There is always a tomorrow when one is serving a six-year term, dealing daily with ninety-nine other strong personalities. Whatever one’s beliefs and loyalties to various political interests, and however loudly one wishes to argue about substance, this is no place for underhanded tactics or dissembling behavior when it comes to your colleagues, because the payback in such cases is usually paralysis. The Senate, more than any other body in American government, is a place where a very few people, and on occasion even a single member, can stop things from getting done.

The United States Senate is a venerable institution. It is also an odd kingdom with 100 fiercely protected fiefdoms. No, let me amend that, as they say in this place. In terms of volatility, behind all of its courtesies the United States Senate is composed of 100 scorpions in a jar. And one should be very careful in deciding how and when to shake that jar.