

Letters to the Editor, Washington Post

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An ode to congressional staffers



Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) on Capitol Hill on Dec. 20.
(Elizabeth Frantz for The Washington Post)

There are many reasons to mourn the retirement of Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) from the Senate: the loss of his wisdom, experience, vision, ethics and commitment to human rights. Paul Kane's Jan. 15 @PKCapitol news column, "[From Watergate to Jan. 6, Leahy spanned the nation's constitutional crises](#)," highlighted another: Mr. Leahy's relationship with his remarkably loyal staff, many with him for decades. As he goes, so will his staff. We will miss them.

One example: Tim Rieser, who spent 38 years working for the senator, including 28 as Democratic clerk for the subcommittee on state and foreign operations. He influenced diplomacy and aid programs around the world, promoting human rights, conflict mitigation, disaster response, environment, health and democratic institutions. He also modeled what congressional oversight of executive branch bureaucracies should be.

For close to a decade, as the [U.S. Agency for International Development's](#) mission director in Indonesia (1998 to 2003) and Russia (2003 to 2007), I was tasked to report to Mr. Rieser on our activities. In line with his boss's example of promoting consensus and collaboration, he provided thoughtful oversight, exercising his control of our budgets with a soft touch, posing good questions and nudging us to think deeper. Reporting to him was never contentious; it gave us a chance to explore what we thought was needed and what he thought constituents could support.

We often overlook the staff expertise that comes with effective congressional leadership. Mr. Kane pointed out that Mr. Leahy didn't. "I say thank you every day," the article reported Mr. Leahy saying. We should do the same.

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