

My Time as a “Hilltern”

Hilltern- An Intern who works on the Hill.

This Summer (2011) I got the once in a lifetime opportunity to work for the United States Senate. The entire trip was made possible due to the Hatfield Scholars program that not only helped me get the internship, but also to find my feet in D.C. and help cover my living expenses during my time there. With this short essay I hope to describe my experience and though I'm sure words will never do it justice, I'll do my best. I plan not only to walk you through my work but also my experiences and also introduce you all the wonderful people I met (I'm sure may miss out a few and I apologize in advance for that) in order to give you a complete picture. I hope you as a reader find this to be not just a standard dry serious write-up but a light hearted and (hopefully) interesting read. Here goes...

When I first got the call from Mr. Brian Hendricks, the then Republican Staff Director for the United States Senate Committee on Commerce Science and Transportation, (Minority office) (Commerce Committee) with the offer to come work for him at the Committee, I was excited to get a chance working in the Nation's Capital for the Senate, needless to say I immediately accepted. Being an international student, I arrived in the US from Mumbai, India a year ago in order to pursue my Masters in Interdisciplinary Telecommunications Program (ITP) and also being an engineer in a city known for its Law and Policy I was a little apprehensive about how I would manage the job I accepted without a second thought. Luckily for me, our program requires us to take policy credits and so I proceeded to DC with only one course with the Law school under my belt as the total of my “Law” experience. To add to my apprehensiveness, I never knew how to answer the “What will you be doing for the Senate?” question that everybody seemed to ask me when I told them the great news. I just didn't know what my exact job description was so I prepared a standard line, “I will be getting coffee and making copies...” that I proceeded to use on everyone who asked me that question.

Upon landing in D.C. (less than a week after I got the offer from Mr. Hendricks) I got a quick education of the Metro System (the main way to navigate D.C. if you don't have a car and can't really afford a cab) and also the weather, very hot and humid (quite like Mumbai). Being spoiled by Boulder's beautiful weather for around 9 months, it took a while to get used to. The first thing you will notice as an “outsider” to D.C. is there are a lot, I repeat a LOT of people who wear suits. The most I have ever seen in my life (I joined that group real soon). I lived in Foggy Bottom, D.C, a 25 minute metro ride away from the Capitol and a place populated with students and other fellow Hillterns due to the presence of the George Washington University. After a days rest at my apartment to recover from the flight I made my way to the Dirksen Senate building where I would be working for the next two months, having very little knowledge of American politics and the political system other than what I read and hear people talking about.

When you first begin walking from the metro station to the Senate Office Buildings, you get to pass by the House office buildings, the Library of Congress, the Capitol and the Supreme Court. That in itself is a truly great feeling to finally get to see all the buildings you see on T.V. when all the important news about the Nation comes in. The Capitol building was my favorite of the lot (maybe I'm a little biased as I worked there), as one staffer very aptly put it, "... the day I get tired of seeing the Capitol when coming in to work each morning, that's when I will think of looking for another job." I checked into Dirksen and made my way up to the Commerce Committee office. Theresa Eugene, the Executive Assistant was the first person I had to meet, she helped me get set up, showed me my desk, introduced me to a couple of people in the office and took me to get my Senate ID (the most important thing to get in and around the buildings). Brian then took it from there, introduced me to everyone in the office and introduced me to Christopher "Chris" Herndon who was to be the person I reported to and who I would assist. Chris was welcoming and helped explain all the difficult and subtle points of law and policy I had trouble with on the assignments he gave me. My main focus was dealing with Privacy and Data-Security. On my very first day I was assigned with attending a meeting on Cloud computing and providing a brief explanation of what it was about. The summary I needed to provide needed to explain all the technical terms that was used in cloud computing in a way that anyone who needed to work on it would understand but still be detailed enough to cover the important points.

I also prepared section-by-sections of certain bills dealing with Privacy and Data security coming out of the Commerce Committee (another thing Chris gave me a crash course in). Another one of my duties was to read the news articles and documents and give my thoughts on it as an engineer. The Senators in our Committee, headed by the Chairman Senator Rockefeller (WVa) along with Ranking Member Sen. Hutchison (TX) held hearings on topics of relevance to the Commerce Committee, for example we held a hearing on 'National Nanotechnology Investment: Manufacturing, Commercialization & Job Creation' and also 'Privacy and Data Security: Protecting Consumers in the Modern World' among others. I did some research for some of our hearings. In addition to that, I attended meetings on the current scenario of data security, cyber security, debates on search engine regulation, forums on U.S. Innovation and many others and prepared summaries and also gave my thoughts on the issues brought up in the meetings. In doing all this I worked very closely with Chris, Maryam Khan, Rebecca Seidel (who I also went to for all my ethics questions), Rebecca Hooks, Cheryl Pascoe, Jack Smedile and Will Carty, all of whom provided me with valuable feedback and encouragement that helped me perform better. Finally, I had an answer to the "What do you do at the Senate?" question..

As I am a Telecommunications engineer by training, I followed all the hot telecommunications issues at the time (like the LightSquared - GPS debate, the AT&T-T-Mobile merger proposal and the spectrum auction issues) and as Telecom came under our Committees purview I often requested David "Q" Quinalty, our Telecom point man and one of the most knowledgeable people on Telecom policy I know, for any assignments related to the subject.

Thanks to Q, I got to see the hearings and attend briefings on these debates and see news being made in my field as it happens. That really drove home all that we learned in class about these issues and it helped me fully understand the often hidden subtleties and nuances of these issues. Accompanying me to many of these meetings was Kristine Fargotstein, the only other intern at the office (David Quinalty's intern). Being there many months before me, Kristine helped me understand the ropes and gave me great tips on what an intern should and shouldn't do, showed me how to use some of our online Senate resources and also helped me edit some of my work. There was one Major change in our Commerce Committee Office; Brian Hendricks stepped down as our staff director as he got a great opportunity to be the Head of Technology Policy at Nokia Siemens Networks. I and everyone else at the Commerce Committee Minority office were very sad to see him go and would really miss the many spirited debates and "Brianisms" that were very common in our office. Brian has a reputation of taking the tough decisions and being very persistent in getting the job done and the staff meetings were always fun to attend. I was really worried about what would happen next till I heard Todd Bertson, Brian's right hand man would be taking over. Todd has done a great job since assuming reigns and has been an equally awesome boss to work for.

During my short couple of months working on the Hill, I got to witness one of the most important issues concerning the Economy, the Debt ceiling debate (The debate on whether to raise the US debt ceiling so as not to default on the nations loans). It really was a very tense time and everyone in the Government from the Senate, the House (of Representatives) and all the people in the White House were working long hours to figure it out. Ordinary citizens were very concerned about this as well and they made their voice heard by calling their Congressmen and Senators and letting them know they wanted them reach a solution soon. While approaching the debt default date, the number of concerned people was so much that it overloaded many of the websites of the members of Congress' websites and some of my friends in Senators offices had dreams about people calling them up at night). Luckily on the very last day of tense negotiations a deal was struck and the crisis was averted (for the time-being). Being in a country where people have such free and direct access to their Congressmen and Senators is a great privilege that people sometimes take for granted.

Towards the end of my stint at the Commerce Committee, I had gained sufficient exposure to Data and Cyber-security issues, attended meeting and looked at many bills, laws and meetings on the subjects and was asked by Chris Herndon to prepare my own proposal for a bill for Cyber-security. This was to be my final project. So I spent the last three weeks (aside from my other duties) researching what has been done in the past along with hearing what industry is requesting for and what federal and state level agencies are looking for. It was not a straightforward task, but under the guidance of my Co-workers I presented my proposal title "Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2011" I intend it to serve as a backbone on which future bills can be eventually be based on.

Leaving the office after spending over two months there was tough. I formed friendships both within my offices and with staff from Senators offices and also Congressman's offices. We were a relatively small group and the advantage of that was everyone in the office knew everyone else. I regularly chatted with one of our NASA detailees, Trent Smith who would keep me up to date with all the NASA happenings (I watched the final space shuttle launch online from my desk) and being a big science geek, it was very emotional watching the end of an era. Ms. Theresa Eugene was the person I went to anytime I needed to find a particular office in the Senate or the Capitol and also for advice on general procedures and other things, she was an invaluable friend. The things I think I will take away that benefit me the most is the work ethic. Senators and Congressmen have incredibly busy schedules voting, holding meetings with companies and constituents and flying back and forth between their states and D.C. so I will always correct people who say that Members of Congress are sitting around doing nothing. I worked weekdays from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and more often than not, the guys in my room Chris, Galen Roehl and Haliburton "Hap" Rigby were in before me and left quite a while after me if there was work that needed to be done. I do not think anyone in the office came in knowing everything about a certain topic. By hard work, research, reading and holding meetings with the concerned parties they have made themselves authorities on the subject in the office. The importance of reading the daily news clips and headlines (thanks to Rebecca Fisher and Chelsea Adler for painstakingly getting them ready each morning) should not be understated. The bipartisan staff from the Commerce Committee kept things functioning smoothly between the majority and the minority. It is really great to see the different departments coming together to work on things.

That was all the regarding the work, but that was not all of my experience at the Capitol. The most important thing in D.C. other than work is networking and forming relationships with people. Professor Preston Padden did a fantastic job of helping us out with that. Right from almost the first week, I along with my fellow CU partners-in-crime Christopher "Chris" Cook and Douglas "Doug" Brake (who were interning at the FCC) met up with CU Alumni working in D.C. along with other prominent people on the Hill thanks to a get together organized by Prof. Padden. We also had lunch with Mitch Rose, Peggy Binzel, Bill Bailey, Jessica Moore, Carl Thorsen and Eddie Fritts, who shared openly and very candidly their experiences of life on the Hill with us. Jessica Moore set us up with invitations to see a movie a day before it released and also passes to sit in the Presidential suite to watch the Congressional baseball game. That was an awe inspiring experience, sitting behind home plate watching the members of Congress playing each other. At the event, Doug, Chris and I met former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, current Speaker of the House John Boehner, Congressman James Clyburn and his daughter, F.C.C Commissioner Mignon Clyburn and also got to shake hands and click a picture with Boulders Congressman Jared Polis. While at the Senate, I got a chance to meet both the Colorado Senators Mark Udall (who is passionate about mountain climbing) and Michael Bennet (Interesting fact: He was born in Delhi, India) and also Congressmen Cory Gardner and Jared Polis (for the second time) of Colorado. I also got pictures with the Senator I worked under, Sen.

Kay Bailey Hutchison (Texas), a wonderful woman who is passionate about technology issues. In addition to that I got pictures with all the Senators on my floor, Sen. Kay Hagan (North Carolina), Sen. Roger Wicker (Missouri) and Sen. John Thune (South Dakota) who knew me on a first name basis as I kept running into him every second day.

It was not all just work and networking in D.C, We also attended Spectrum Policy lectures held by the dynamic Prof. Bryan Traymont (WBK, LLP.), who also hosted networking events for a few D.C interns. We met some fantastic people from those events. Mark Walker, a CU alum also worked at WBK and he re-introduced us to Travis Litman another CU alumni at the FCC. Mark also introduced me to fellow ITP Alumni Adam Olshefski (who gave me a few more networking tips) towards the end of my stay in D.C. As you can see we had a very busy time having a lot of fun in D.C

What made this experience even more memorable for me was that I celebrated two personal milestones in D.C. well. I spent my first Independence Day in America in the Nations Capital. To make the most of this, I along with one of my roommates went to watch the Capitol 4th Concert and saw the fireworks while sitting on the steps of the Capitol. To finish our 4th of July experience we visited the White House as well that night. I also had the pleasure of celebrating completing one year in the United States, which I celebrated by getting donuts for everyone at our Commerce Committee Office.

As you may have guessed by now, I had a great time in Washington D.C. There were so many people that helped us out directly and indirectly when we were there, thank you. One of the things you learn very quickly on the Hill, is that there is a very strong chance that anyone who deals with technology and telecommunications will have heard of Prof. Dale Hatfield, Prof. Phil Weiser, Prof. Doug Sicker and Prof. Preston Padden. It's great to know that the University of Colorado has very strong links with Washington D.C. Most importantly I would really like to thank all the generous donors and well wishers of the Hatfield Scholars Program. Washington D.C is a very expensive city and without your support this trip would have been impossible. Thank you for the opportunity. With your support I'm sure there will be many more experiences like the one I had this Summer for many other students.

Sincerely,

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(Former "Hilltern")

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