



# FORMER MEMBERS OF CONGRESS THE CONGRESSIONAL STUDY GROUPS

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Testimony by Peter M. Weichlein, FMC CEO, before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, on Thursday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chairman Timmons, for this opportunity to testify again before the Committee, and thank you also for the important work this Committee is doing in support of the institution we all care about so much.

The Chairman is already well acquainted with the association of Former Members of Congress and has met with our board of directors as recently as three months ago. Let me nonetheless give a brief background to the organization I represent, since it has direct bearing on the question before the Committee. FMC was founded over 50 years ago as an alumni organization for former Members of the House and the Senate, with our original purpose being to keep Members connected to their colleagues and to the Congress following their service on Capitol Hill. We were founded in 1970 and received a Congressional Charter in 1983. We are 100% bipartisan. Our leadership and Executive Committee are split evenly between the parties, and any program we conduct includes at least one Democrat and one Republican. We have over the past 50 years greatly expanded our programming to make the best use possible of the unique experience housed within our organization. Our mission now focuses on three main areas: educating the public about Congress and public service; strengthening representative democracy at home and abroad; and supporting Congress as an institution and Members in their work on behalf of the American people.

In addition to the programmatic work FMC stands for, we are a repository of Congressional experience, knowledge, and history. If you add up the combined years of legislative experience of the almost 800 former Members united under the FMC umbrella, you very quickly get to several thousand years. And that is the first point I want to make for this Committee: we are an unparalleled resource to you and your work. Rarely does a large organization have an outside institutional memory, and FMC is that for the U.S. Congress. In a time when there are fewer and fewer long-time serving Members, some ideas that were tried in the past are coming back around, and FMC has the resources to help this Committee think through intended and unintended consequences. We can help understand what has happened before, why something may have failed, and what can be done to improve it. And on behalf of FMC's membership and board of directors, I want to assure you that we are eager to support this Committee's work in any way we can.

In addition to exceptional institutional knowledge, FMC offers unimpeachable bipartisan credentials. Like this Committee, we believe that working together as colleagues across the political aisle results in pragmatic and sensible solutions. Our



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work is not defined by election-results, is non-partisan and credibly includes voices from a vast political spectrum. For example, at the beginning of the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, FMC released a letter to Congressional Leadership highlighting the need to work together for the good of the country. That letter was signed by almost 130 former Representatives and Senators, with an almost equal number of Democrats and Republicans. So in addition to supporting this Committee as a resource of institutional knowledge and experience, FMC can help identify and amplify common values that the majority of current Members can rally around.

As you consider the Committee's work during the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress and how other entities can support the work you do, I've already highlighted our unparalleled knowledge of Congress, its history and its procedures, as well as our commitment to bipartisanship. Let me add to that our unique ability to amplify your work with the public. We can serve as an additional public face, especially in areas where your own advocacy could be accused of being self-serving, for example when it comes to a Member's Representational Allowance or process questions such as earmarks. There are a number of your former colleagues who were part of this very committee as recently as a few months ago, and they can now, as active Members in FMC, continue the important work they care about so deeply. I'm thinking of Members like Susan Brooks or Tom Graves, who are a natural link between this Committee and FMC.

Much of the work you have done already corresponds to issues raised in FMC's 2019 report *Congress at a Crossroads*. We interviewed four dozen lawmakers who left Congress after the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, and I have shared that report with the Committee's staff. Regardless of party or length of service, there were a number of core concerns the Members shared with us as they analyzed their public service. Some of these issues I am sure will find their way into your thinking now that you're convening for this session. There's a tremendous thirst for stronger personal relationships among Members, and the opportunity to come together as colleagues, regardless of party label. Frankly, there's also disappointment with leadership that seems to prioritize power over bipartisanship and political advantage over building consensus. Members are frustrated with ideological and political echo chambers driven by cable news and social media. Also, rank-and-file Members feel like they have little input in legislation even if they are part of the majority, and even less professional satisfaction as part of the minority. And they lament the fact that everything, from freshmen orientation to the way Committee staff works, is divided along partisan and party lines. Many of your almost 100 recommendations from the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress have already started dealing with numerous of these concerns, and FMC would be thrilled to work with you as you determine the specific needs and appetite for reform in the current Congress.



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FMC already conducts a myriad of programs aimed at supporting Congress and current Members, and I hope that you will consider our positive experience in your analysis. For example, we are one of the premier private organizations implementing CODELs and StaffDELs overseas. We bring Members together on a bipartisan basis for legislative exchanges with elected representatives in legislatures overseas, both for programming on Capitol Hill and for privately funded trips overseas through FMC's Congressional Study Group on Germany, Congressional Study Group on Japan, Congressional Study Group on Korea and the Congressional Study Group on Europe. Obviously, due to COVID, we have not been able to do so for a year now, but we aim to restart the program during the second half of this year. We bring Members together as colleagues and away from DC, and in addition to doing a deep dive on issues such as trade policy, they have the opportunity to get to know each other on a personal level. We have for over a decade expanded that work to also serve Chiefs of Staff, and three years ago we expanded again, this time to serve District Directors. We need to do a better job dispelling the public cynicism when it comes to CODELs, because in addition to educating Members on the issues they are working on, they are invaluable in bringing Members together as colleagues.

Also, and maybe I should have led with this, FMC received a grant from the Murdock Charitable Trust specifically to support this Committee's work when it comes to bipartisanship and civility. Thanks to Murdock, we will put on FMC's full-time staff a communications program officer who can work with this Committee's staff when it comes to some of the resources I outlined earlier: acting as a soapbox on behalf of the Committee vis-à-vis the public, and organizing a bipartisan group of former Members to bring to bear FMC's institutional knowledge at your request.

We have also started – in this age of COVID – to host a virtual convening every two weeks of District Directors across the country. Through FMC they have the opportunity to come together across the political aisle as colleagues and exchange best practices on the issues many of them are working on, such as constituent services, staffing issues etc. We'll keep offering this bipartisan convening, even after we all emerge from the global pandemic.

Once we can travel again, we want to restart a project in which Congressman Davis participated a couple of years ago: organizing a bipartisan group of current Members to be hosted by a colleague in her or his district. With Mr. Davis, four current Members were hosted in Boston by then-Representative Kennedy, and we put a program together that included visits to half a dozen local high schools and other community groups. In addition to Members spending time together as



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colleagues, it is an opportunity to hear how issues such as environmental policy are viewed by citizens in other parts of the country.

In addition to this existing work, which we hope to expand once COVID allows for travel and in-person programming again, we are developing ideas specifically in answer to the question: how can FMC best support the current Congress? First and foremost, FMC wants to play a positive role in the professional experience of newly elected Members. Starting with Freshmen Orientation in 2023, FMC seeks to be a resource to new Members from Day 1, for example by bringing new Members from both parties together for a “Life In Congress” discussion that can focus on family life, seeking committee assignments, or tapping into senior Members as a resource. We will also offer professional development through mentoring to those new Members interested in having a former Member as a resource. This is an opportunity for confidential, repeatable, scalable one-on-one mentoring that could be hugely beneficial to someone new to Capitol Hill.

Also, as you are well aware, much work needs to be done to educate and reengage the public. Our current work does a tremendous job of student engagement, but this outreach needs to be increased dramatically. We’re envisioning a “Congress does good work” campaign that could highlight success stories, bipartisanship, and the ability of Republicans and Democrats working together for the greater good.

These are just some of the projects FMC conducts already, or is planning to conduct in the near future, in support of Congress, bipartisanship and civility. Like all of you, and all of us testifying today, we cherish Congress as an institution. We all want to be the antidote to the prevailing cynicism that dehumanizes Members, forces them into opposing tribes, and celebrates tweets over substance. True reform needs to come from within, and I applaud this Committee for the work that has already been done, but we all agree that much more is needed. To do so, I again offer FMC and its 800 former Members of Congress as a resource to you. Thank you, Chairman Kilmer, for your invitation to me, and Vice Chair Timmons, please know how much FMC looks forward to working with you.