

**TESTIMONY OF AARON JONES
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**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION**

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MAY 6, 2021

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Timmons, and Members of the committee, thank you for asking me to testify before you today.

I currently serve as the Director of Congressional Relations for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a federal trust instrumentality created by Congress in 1968 to provide a place for scholarship, open debate, and actionable ideas that the legislative branch can use to create policy. We do not advocate a position; rather, our job is to provide Congress with expertise in order to make informed decisions and take educated votes on the issues our nation faces. The legislative branch is called upon to do everything from naming post offices to declaring war. No individual Member or staffer can be an expert on all the things you are asked to weigh in on. You must rely on trustworthy experts who will dispense good advice and avoid lobbying.

It is commonplace to hear that our politics are broken and that Congress has never been so divided. Not only does our history prove that sentiment incorrect, but through the policy education programs we run at the Wilson Center, we know that there are men and women within this institution who care deeply about this country and want to work with the other side to find common ground. This is not something that the media likes to report. Ratings are better for stories where Republicans and Democrats are at each other's throats and a government shutdown clock is winding down to zero. A story about congressional staffers regularly meeting to develop professionally, become better advisors to their Members, learn about issues, ask honest questions and work through consensus building exercises just isn't one people want to read. But that doesn't mean it isn't happening. Our job, as people who care about our country and this institution, is to continue to provide these opportunities and make sure that we do not create a self-fulfilling prophecy where we say there is no bipartisanship, therefore we must make it so.

I began my career as an intern on Capitol Hill in the mid-aughts, working for Rep. Hal Rogers, for whom I worked until 2014. While working for him, and with the Appropriations Committee during his tenure as Chairman, I saw first-hand the behind-the-scenes bipartisan work done every day, many times into the night and on weekends, by staff on both sides of the Committee. In

2014, I began to seek out ways to grow professionally and was advised by a mentor to find ways to meet other staffers from across the aisle. Taking this advice, I worked on a Masters Degree using the program available for staffers through the Naval War College. A colleague in Rep. Rogers's office also told me about the Foreign Policy Fellowship Program he was taking at the Wilson Center.

I never dreamed as a staffer that participating in this program would lead to my becoming the Director of Congressional Relations at the Wilson Center and managing the very same program. When I participated as a staffer, the program was run by Aaron David Miller who was the then-Vice President for New Initiatives. CEO Emeritas Jane Harman envisioned a program where congressional staff could be separated from their offices for a few hours a week, to come together, learn, meet, and grow together. I am proud to carry on this work from Dr. Miller and under the leadership of Jane Harman and our current CEO, Ambassador Mark Green.

At the Wilson Center we run several policy education programs for congressional staff. The core of our programs is the Foreign Policy Fellowship Program (FPFP) which is supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This program targets mid-to-senior level staffers and consists of six classes held on Friday afternoons. Each session focuses on a different foreign policy topic and lasts two to three hours. Participants also engage in an interactive simulation exercise designed by our experts. These exercises place participants in groups where staffers from both chambers and both parties have to work together to come to responses that appeal to the whole group. Finally, staffers come together for a social hour (this portion has been omitted during the pandemic, but we intend to reinstate this when conditions permit).

In addition to FPFP, we run Masterclass sessions on various important issue areas which are targeted towards senior-level staff. These classes take a deep dive on one issue area and staffers can work for several hours studying it. Thus far, we have conducted Masterclasses on cybersecurity, Russia, China, the Arctic, and North Korea, with sessions on Africa and on water security upcoming. Beyond these offerings, we also have classes on cybersecurity and artificial intelligence that follow the FPFP and Masterclass model.

To date, we have had nearly 1,300 congressional staff participate in the various classes we offer. Many staff take multiple classes with us. About two-thirds of our participants work in House offices and one-third in the Senate (as expected due to the different size of the chambers) and are pretty evenly split between party affiliations. Upon graduation from these programs, staffers become part of an alumni network. We engage with our alumni further by offering additional briefings, forums and delegation trips to keep staffers informed and most importantly, interacting with each other. As Members know from congressional delegation activities, traveling with colleagues can not only be an educational asset for policy making, but it also builds relationships and friendships that extend beyond chamber or party, and can last a lifetime. We have heard directly from staff participants that their experiences in our programs have led to staff working

together across the aisle to either create legislation or simply to have a sounding board with the other side as they craft policy. As one staffer told us, “Through the Wilson Foreign Policy Fellowship I expanded my understanding of global political issues. The supportive environment spurred great debate and discussions of complex problems that allowed me to learn from others and challenge myself. I continue to be incredibly grateful for the relationships and friendships I formed during the program.” I can attest to this as well from my own experience participating in the program as a staffer and traveling to places to see in person the issues we had studied.

One of the things we are most proud of with our programs is the broad bipartisan appeal that we receive among congressional staff. After eight years of running this program, the Wilson Center has developed a reputation among staffers for providing solid, nonpartisan expertise that is useful to their work for their Members, as well as for their careers. Many staffers hear about this opportunity for professional growth by word-of-mouth from their peers and colleagues. One participant recently told us that he had heard about our programs while he did interviews on the Hill, describing the opportunity as a professional development perk of the job. I am often contacted by Chiefs of Staff and other hiring managers on the Hill who take notice that our programming is listed on a candidate’s resume. Another staffer alumna has said that she considered our program to be “one of the most eye-opening experiences from my time on Capitol Hill, given how much I learned and how much more open I became to welcoming new ideas and new viewpoints.”

I am submitting for the record, an article published in the most recent edition of the *Carnegie Reporter*, a publication of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This article goes through the policy education programs that are funded by Carnegie, including those at the Wilson Center and other institutions. [Carnegie Reporter - Continuing Education for Congress: Building Trust and Expertise — To Get Things Done](#)

I hope what I have demonstrated here today proves that there are some rays of sunshine through the clouds. It is my hope that places like the Wilson Center can continue to find the resources to maintain these types of programs for congressional staff, not only for their individual professional development, but for the health of a vibrant democracy.