



Back in Session

January 9, 2008

Wow. We're back in session and it's been hectic.

Once I finish filing all of my legislation in the next few weeks, I'll send a more comprehensive explanation of my priorities for the session (funding early childhood education, raising teacher salaries, and providing incentives for energy conservation). And I'll try to give you the skinny on some of the negotiations surrounding a few important bills.

But for this week's newsletter I'd like to describe an interesting dilemma I recently faced involving an opportunity I had to appear on [Comedy Central's "Colbert Report,"](#) a humorous late-night political talk show.

A few months ago, I received a call from the show's producer. She'd seen "[Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore,](#)" the documentary Frank Popper made about our 2004 congressional race, and loved it. She asked if I'd come on the show to discuss it. Their willingness to go out on a limb, to bring on an obscure state senator from Missouri when major national politicians seek bookings on the show, took real guts.

The opportunity to be on "Colbert" excited me — and scared the hell out of me (host Stephen Colbert is notorious for humiliating the politicians he interviews). More importantly, it offered an unprecedented audience for the film. The filmmakers set out to create a film about more than one race in St. Louis. Instead, they made a movie about our dysfunctional political process. They tackled serious issues that the media too often ignores: political dynasties, the media's neglect of substance and the consequent voter apathy (especially among youth), and the power of establishment money and connections. The filmmakers — who put years of work into the film — craved the exposure that a national television appearance would have provided.

Unfortunately, soon after I was asked to appear, the Writers Guild went on strike. The show made every effort to support the writers in spirit and practice. When the show returned to the airwaves in January, Stephen Colbert refused to hire replacement writers or write anything himself, limiting the show to interviews and improvisational humor. He agreed to their guild members' requests, offering the same deal that David Letterman's staff had accepted. However, the broader guild discouraged Colbert's writers from accepting a side deal, fearing it would weaken the larger movement.

Because Colbert had gone so far to respect the striking writers, we weren't sure if the show would be picketed. I called friends in labor for advice, and at their suggestion called the Writers Guild. Some guild members said there was a picket line, while others said there was not. Still, Viacom, Comedy Central's parent company, was a struck company.

The week before we were slated to tape the show, I called the producer and told her I had always supported the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively, and couldn't violate the writers' strike. She was unhappy, and had every right to be, given the lengths to which the show had gone to reach an agreement with its writers. I appreciated that they gave me a chance, and hated to say no.

While appearing on Colbert would've been a great opportunity, I feel most badly that Frank Popper's film missed an opportunity. The filmmakers succeeded in creating a film about fighting establishment power through the combined power of passionate individuals joining together to make a difference. The film has succeeded (in venues ranging from high school civics classes in Paris, Texas to film festivals in Paris, France) because it's about much more than just one congressional race. It's a film that can speak to the electorate.

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