

## Testimonial

### Connecting the Dots with “Inside Washington”

By Jessica Lipnack

The room is long and narrow, the tables round, and I’m apparently nervous. When I stand to introduce myself, as everyone does, I spill coffee over my binder, onto a table-mate’s plate of fruit and into a puddle by another’s notes.

We are here for “Inside Washington.” In the next three days, we will learn how Washington works from Brookings’s big names, a political strategist, the co-author of The Iraq Study Group Report, a Washington blogger, lobbyists, a diplomat, an industry expert, a civil rights activist...and one another.

We will role-play whether to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas development—and have our performances judged by Washington insiders. We’ll listen to a veteran of the Office of Management and Budget while sitting in the Old Executive Office Building, watch Congress debating how to legislate against Internet predators and stand in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee room as a former congressman explains what happens there.

“It’s been a long time since civics in eighth grade,” says Wade Walters of the Social Security Administration. “Inside Washington gave me a broader understanding of not just the textbook way that Washington works but how it really works. You go to the law enforcement academy and they say, ‘this is how it’s supposed to work,’ and then you go to the street to see how it really works. Brookings is like that.”

After twenty years in government, Walters moved to Washington just a few months ago. “Being able to network with other government, NGO and private-sector people is very beneficial,” says the “sole OIG liaison guy” for Social Security’s Inspector General’s office. Walters is referring to our thirty-five colleagues—an editor of a Taiwanese newspaper, a lawyer at an energy giant plus people from the U.S. Mint, NASA, the Air Force, Health and Human Services and General Services Administration (none of whom spill their coffee, I notice).

Like Walters, Barbara Kakiris, who manages conferences and events for NASA’s aeronautics research centers, found the case-study assignment especially effective in expanding her perspective. “The exercise really pushes you to think in ways that you wouldn’t normally. They put me in the industry group; the people from industry were in the environmental group. This is an experience you just don’t get anywhere else. Even people who didn’t like group exercises got into it.

“And then you have the boldface names,” Kakiris continues, “sitting around volunteering their time to evaluate our presentations, not taking what we’re doing lightly at all. It’s been good for me to see first-hand that these impressive, ‘godlike’ figures are approachable and that they have similar vulnerabilities.”

Kakiris, who’s in the Certificate in Public Leadership program at Brookings, keeps her program notebook on her desk. “I refer to it constantly,” she says.

“I’ve taken the course, filed it in my mind, and then I’m finding that what I’ve learned comes to bear later,” says another participant from the U.S. Forest Service. “What I like about this course is that it focuses on Congress in the context of the world. It teaches you to think more broadly. It helps me understand where my agency fits into the picture and helps me connect the dots.”

Which is how I feel when I leave—that I’ve seen the workings of Washington from multiple perspectives. That, as the Forest Service participant says, “I am better aware of how I can do something in my world about the rest of the world.”