

Congress in Objects

This Desk Has Been Through a Lot

When Thad Cochran of Mississippi announced on March 5 that he would be resigning from the Senate due to declining health, it also meant the seven-term Republican would be passing on a desk with some famous occupants — and a violent history.

The desk — number 60, as it is known — was once used by Jefferson Davis. But in 1861, Davis abandoned that piece of furniture and Washington to become president of the Confederate States of America. Nearly four months later, a group of Union soldiers from Massachusetts who were temporarily encamped in the Senate chamber had the idea to start whacking at the desk with their bayonets. Isaac Bassett, a doorkeeper, heard the sound of splintering wood as he entered the chamber.

“Stop! What are you doing?” Bassett hollered, according to his unpublished autobiography.

The soldiers’ answer: “We are cutting that damn traitor’s desk to pieces.” Bassett admonished the soldiers that it was not Davis’ desk, but the U.S. government’s. “You were put here to protect, and not to destroy!” he told them.

The soldiers stopped their attack, and the desk was later repaired with a mahogany inlay. In the years since, the desk has had numerous occupants, including Harry S. Truman of Missouri, the future president. His inscription is inside the desk drawer (many senators scrawl their names inside the drawers).

In 1995, Cochran was successful in getting a resolution approved that offers the senior senator from Mississippi first dibs on the desk. Roger Wicker, a Republican, says he will take it, and he has in the past extolled Davis. In 2015, he told CQ sister publication Roll Call that Davis, despite his Confederate past, was “a historical figure to be studied and honored.”

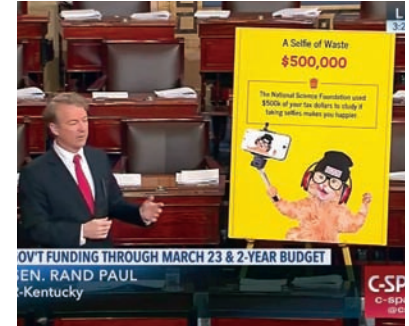
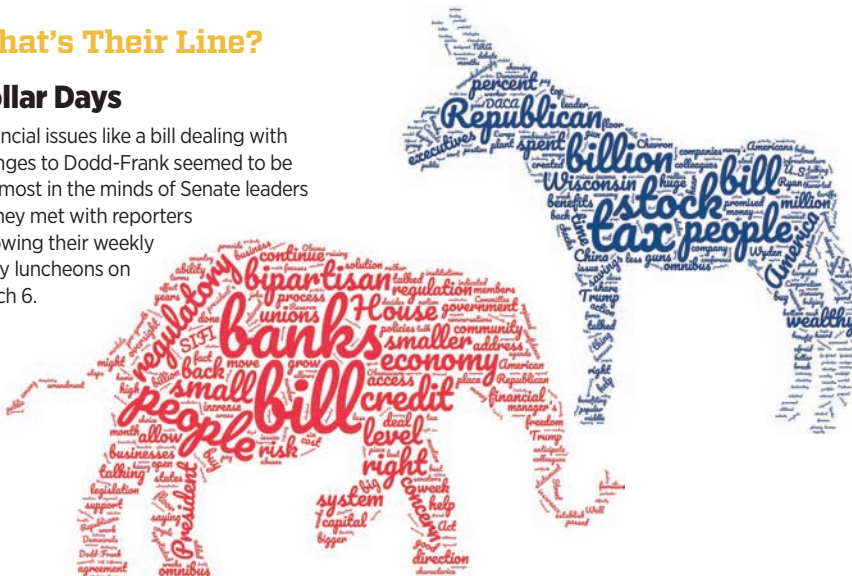


— Jonathan Miller

What’s Their Line?

Dollar Days

Financial issues like a bill dealing with changes to Dodd-Frank seemed to be foremost in the minds of Senate leaders as they met with reporters following their weekly party luncheons on March 6.



Courtesy C-Span

Hill Soup

The Cat Does Seem Happy

Rand Paul came prepared.

On Feb. 8, the Republican senator from Kentucky held the floor, delaying a vote on a budget deal. He put on display a parade of charts — 10 in all — to demonstrate what he views as wasteful spending in Congress. There were charts on a taxpayer-funded video game on climate change and the streetcar that runs along H Street, among other supposed boondoggles.

Perhaps the most eye-catching floor chart, however, was one that featured, inexplicably, a cat in a wool hat and headphones holding a selfie stick (maybe it was a nod to the 2016 cat movie *Keanu*, but Paul’s office did not return requests seeking clarity on the matter). Also, the phone is being held backwards. Paul alleged that taxpayer-funded research was being conducted to determine whether taking selfies made people happier.

“Everybody likes to take a selfie, right? If you don’t do them, your kids will do them, your grandkids will do them,” Paul said from the floor. “I really would like to watch you going around the neighborhood knocking on doors asking for money to study whether selfies make you happy.”

In 2012, researchers at the University of California at Irvine were awarded \$500,000 from the National Science Foundation to study multitasking among millennials and how they interacted with technology. The grant produced several papers, one of which found that college students, indeed, made themselves happier when taking selfies. One participant in the study explained the impact of the selfie: “Instead of going routinely and mechanically during the day, I stop and look around for something that makes me smile. I didn’t consciously do that before.”

— Jonathan Miller and Amelia Frappolli