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A View From The Hill

By John White

When I returned from military leave, I asked Dino Atsalis, the Delta MEC Government Affairs Committee chairman, if he could use an extra hand on the committee. I had spent the previous five-and-a-half years working at the Pentagon for the Chief of Naval Operations, and I felt the experience was a good training ground for union work in Washington, D.C. The company and our union had undergone tremendous change during my absence, and it has been challenging getting back in the cockpit, learning a new corporate culture, and facing the threats to our profession.

With these threats as the backdrop, I would like to express the parallels I've found as I have shifted gears from the DOD into union work up on Capitol Hill. For those of you who have never worked in D.C.—and my guess it is a large majority of our pilot group—the task is both incredibly complicated in application, and indescribably important in its implications.

So what's the lesson? Put simply, everything *outside* the Beltway is not important to everyone *inside* the Beltway. It's true at the DOD, and it's true with the big issues our profession is facing. It's in the way decisions, policies, and budgets are made and executed. It is the most myopic of towns, and yet, in a weird perverted sense, it does work. Decisions are made, policies are changed, and money flows. Unfortunately, there are a good many of these things that are decided and acted upon which are not to our benefit.

When I walked into the ALPA office in Washington, D.C., I was unaware about the issues that Delta pilots (and all U.S. pilots) are facing. I had always thought more about my bid category and pay scales than the global issues that are of the greatest help or hindrance to my career. I've listened to the "noise" that DPA has been putting out, and I wonder if the average pilot understands how shortsighted and suicidal it would be from a legislative affairs perspective.

Our union, and the Delta pilot group in particular, presents our profession's best chance for success in D.C. The DPA leadership is dangerously naive to think that a fractured group of Delta pilots, operating as a small go-it-alone union, would carry any weight in this town. The truth of politics is that it abhors a vacuum, senses weakness, and money talks. The example I can readily use is the deafening silence from the other pilots' unions in D.C. Quite simply they aren't there, they aren't heard, and they are ineffective.

Silence equals consent. This is a simple adage that applies to Pentagon work as much as it does to advocating for the flying profession. We can't afford to take a week off from staying engaged with our politicians and policy makers. ALPA has been the only union — the ONLY voice — for pilots in D.C. with respect to FFDO funding, the Abu Dhabi preclearance facility, Flight Time/Duty time, cabotage and foreign ownership, the JV with Virgin Atlantic, expanded service to Brazil, DCA slot divestiture, and Haneda takeoff and landing slots—just to name *some* of the big issues.

If ALPA members aren't there, all of these issues are left either to chance, the benevolence of our government, or the faint hope that Delta Corporate will carry the Delta pilots' water.

In Washington, D.C., it's all about defining risk and then mitigating it. As a group, the risks to our profession are severe and ever-present.

Let's not become our own worst enemy and create our own next crisis by retreating from our position in D.C. We are lucky enough to have a deep pool of talented people from which to fill the ranks of our volunteers, and luckier still to enjoy the support of our fellow pilots at home. Combine this with the vast experience of ALPA staff and we have doors opened to us on the Hill.

The challenges ahead will test the limits of both the talent and the support, so we can surely use everyone's help. By choosing to remain relevant in D.C., we can face the challenges together and advance the interests of the Delta pilots and our profession.