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As a historian in the House, Fred Beuttler puts current events in perspective

By Michael Leahy

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WASHINGTON- Historians do not do breaking news. Historians do not do the latest scandal scoops, election-night projections, or instant updates of Washington's winners and losers. So it is no surprise that the media's demand for historians is scant. But every now and then, when the breaking political news from Capitol Hill is in dire need of historical context, journalists and politicians alike go looking for Fred Beuttler.



Fred Beuttler joined the House historian's office at the invitation of a Republican speaker, but Democratic Speaker Nancy Pelosi kept him on. (Melina Mara/the Washington Post)

In May 2006, as news unfolded about the controversy over an FBI raid on the House offices of William Jefferson, a Louisiana congressman later to be convicted on corruption charges, several reporters and congressional observers sought guidance from Beuttler, the House's deputy historian. By then, both the House speaker, J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), and the minority leader, Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), had signed a rare joint letter criticizing the raid authorized by the Bush administration -- the executive branch's first break-in of a congressional office in the nation's history.

Why were congressional figures in both parties getting so hot and bothered about it? Beuttler was asked.

For the curious, the answer was offered up in a history lesson. They learned about the Constitution's speech-and-debate clause -- "Article 1, Section 6," Beuttler notes -- and legislators' worry that the FBI raid constituted an infringement of Congress's powers and independence. They learned about England's imperious King Charles I, who once

infamously burst into the House of Commons with an armed guard, hopeful of arresting five members critical of his rule. They learned that, as a concept, the Constitution's separation of powers is at least in part a descendant of the British lessons. "Our job in that moment as historians was to explain the importance of the principles to those interested," Beuttler recalls.

For Beuttler (pronounced BITE-ler), a 48-year-old with glasses, sandy hair and an academician's slightly ruffled demeanor, it matters little that his quotes or perspectives rarely make news. "We're historians -- we're doing something different," he says. A man in love with his job, he smiles while reminiscing about the congressional imbroglio over the Jefferson raid. "It's a good fun topic," says Beuttler, who uses "fun" a lot in discussing his work -- "Here's another fun fact for you . . ." -- swapping historical factoids and perspective with the zest of a kid trading baseball cards.

Beuttler arrived on Capitol Hill as the deputy house historian in 2005, serving under House Historian Robert Remini, a renowned history professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where Beuttler had worked with Remini for seven years after obtaining his doctorate. Each man was appointed to his House post by then-Speaker Hastert, who had reestablished the historian's office after a 10-year lull. When Pelosi became speaker, she had the power to replace Remini and Beuttler but chose to keep both men. "We like to say that the historian's office is not bipartisan; it is nonpartisan," says Beuttler, who recently assumed more responsibilities in the office with the announced resignation of Remini, who turns 89 next month.

Any House member can make use of the historian's office. During the House debate on health-care reform legislation, the office received numerous requests from Rep. John B. Larson (Conn.) and other Democratic lawmakers, who wanted to know about such things as the level of bipartisan support for the approved 1965 Medicare bill and the 1936 Social Security measure. Larson, chairman of the Democratic caucus, used the information in an ultimately unsuccessful appeal to sway Republicans.

Beuttler's responsibilities include conducting lengthy oral interviews with active and retired House members, part of his office's mission to compile a detailed history of the House's key figures, committees and contentious legislative battles. But perhaps nothing the historian's office does is more valuable than placing the current times -- widely regarded as corrosively partisan -- into proper historical perspective.

"These are some of the more partisan times for [Congress], but not the most partisan times," he observes, reminding people about the late 1850s, in the march toward the Civil War. "Perhaps an example of one of the most divisive times came in 1856, with Congressman Preston Brooks."

Brooks's name comes off Beuttler's tongue with a familiarity that bespeaks a career spent trying to understand the forces that have convulsed a country. Brooks, a pro-slavery congressman from South Carolina who carried a walking cane wherever he went, became enraged after learning of a speech by Sen. Charlie Sumner of Massachusetts, in which

Sumner insulted a Brooks relative while castigating pro-slavery forces for violence in Kansas.

Brooks beat Sumner into unconsciousness with his cane.

"You had members of the House and Senate carrying pistols and knives into the chamber," Beuttler says. "The sectional divide created great tensions. . . . These are partisan times today, but these times don't compare to the most partisan periods. . . . It's our job, hopefully, to help communicate that context."