

# Slobs, curmudgeons and a light shining in the dark

**William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune**

WASHINGTON - I am surrounded by utter slobs.

After three months, I've begun to question - not just their willingness to clean up after themselves, but their fundamental ability to do so. They seem incapable of the simplest chores. They're like children, waiting for someone else to take care of their mess.

Actually, some of my roommates may technically still be children, although you wouldn't know that from their alcohol consumption.

I have five roommates. One is a student. Another is a computer geek who raises money for a national political party. A third could be a mad scientist, given that whenever he's there the bathroom, kitchen or living room look like something exploded.

We share a narrow row house a few blocks from Union Station. I could buy a four-bedroom home on the Palouse for what it costs to rent a single room here. It has air conditioning, though, so I'm not complaining.

Actually, I am complaining. I share a bathroom with two 20-something water buffaloes, which is not conducive to my mental well-being. The refrigerator is another sore point. It hasn't been cleaned since the Reagan administration. I'm forced to buy milk in quart containers because there isn't room for anything bigger.

As for the kitchen, even if there were clean pots and pans to cook in, the stove is a toxic waste dump. I stay away from it. I'm living off oatmeal, peanut butter, and cheese and crackers.

This is my last week here. Frankly, I can't wait to head home. I'm usually a very positive person, but this place is turning me into a curmudgeon. I'm grumpy all the time, find fault with everything. I'm not like this.

Actually, I may be a little like that - but if I'm a curmudgeon, at least I'm an Idaho curmudgeon. It's like the difference between the dry, invigorating, preserving heat in Lewiston and the wet, clammy, hand-me-a-squeegee-after-I-walk-to-work humidity they have in D.C.

Clearly, this is not my town. I've been here since April and literally haven't found a single thing I like about it.

OK, there's some decent architecture. And a few good museums. And the monuments.

But Congress? Seriously, that place is a wreck - and its members seem as incapable of cleaning up the mess as my roommates. This is supposed to be the pinnacle of American politics, but I've seen Boy Scout troops handle things more effectively. After a hearing the other week, a college girl behind me said, "Man, I though our student government was screwed up."

How embarrassing is that? Where are the great statesmen? The "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" idealism, the fight-the-good-fight convictions? Where's that "best government on Earth" I've always heard about?

I haven't seen it. I've seen dysfunction unlike anything I ever imagined, schoolyard name-calling, a pervasive sense of entitlement and excuses galore. Rather than an uplifting experience, being here has diminished my hope for the future.

I have a bad attitude. I know that; it makes me question my own perceptions. The negativity bothers me so much I've started asking people to tell me, please, what Congress does well.

Some say it's the responsiveness - the way, win or lose, members go to bat for constituents. Others say it's the way Congress reflects the American public, the demographics of the states, nation and communities as a whole.

Idaho Sen. Jim Risch, who sits on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said foreign and domestic intelligence is a strong suit. His colleague, Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo, cited Congress' oversight role in reviewing the actions and decisions of executive branch agencies.

To a greater or lesser degree, all of those strike me as reasonable answers.

Still, for anyone who's used to success, anyone who's used to getting things done and cleaning up messes, being elected to Congress is like getting tossed in a pit of molasses. It takes years to accomplish the most basic tasks.

"It is extremely frustrating," Crapo said. "The Idaho Legislature is so much better equipped to effectively govern."

Then Crapo shared a story about his first term in Congress.

He served in the House at the time. It was 1993, Democrats had held the majority for 39 years and were used to getting everything their way.

Late one night, after they used a particularly egregious parliamentary maneuver to once again flatten the minority, Crapo decided he'd had enough. He wasn't going to run for re-election.

"I thought, 'What's the point?' " he said. "Everything was stacked against what I want to do. I served in a minority where not one member had ever served in the majority."

Then, as he was walking down the steps of the Capitol, he turned around and saw the dome all lit up, that aura of light shining in the darkness. Tears came to his eyes.

"I'm not going to let them make me quit," he thought.

In the next election, Republicans rolled to a historic victory, picking up 54 seats and winning the majority for the first time since 1952. Over the next four years, they balanced the budget, reformed the welfare system and made other improvements in the regulatory environment.

"Had I quit, I wouldn't have been part of making those things happen," Crapo said. "We can't stop fighting to fix the problems we have."

Yeah, yeah, attractive lighting. I'll give him that. We the people right to life, liberty and happiness new nation conceived in liberty, dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

OK, Congress has a few things going for it. A good pedigree, a solid foundation - and people willing, for whatever reason, to stay here and try to preserve it.

But that's it. Everything else sucks. I'm so done with this place.

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