

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Theatre in the Round: Congress in Action

HERBERT F. WEISBERG AND SAMUEL C. PATTERSON

From across the nation come the representatives of the people – from cities great and small, from towns and hamlets, a few from farms – to gather in the halls of the U.S. Congress. In the House of Representatives, the sergeant at arms installs the mace, a symbol of authority, and the Speaker of the House strikes the gavel to bring the House to order. The chaplain offers the morning prayer, the House approves the journal of the previous day’s business, and a member solemnly delivers the Pledge of Allegiance. In the Senate, in a starker, simpler ceremony, the president pro tempore normally calls the assembly to order. On extraordinary occasions, the Senate may be convened by the vice president of the United States. The chaplain prays, the majority leader is recognized to announce the day’s legislative business, and then the leader calls for “morning business” so that senators can make prepared remarks on any subject. Thus, the congressional drama begins.

Congress as theatre? That is not how either the public or political scientists usually think of it. Yet the idea of Congress as theatre resonates with people very naturally. Citizens’ political socialization may embrace the drama of presidential campaigns more fully than the theatre of congressional politics (Starobin 1996). Nevertheless, both inside and outside the beltway around Washington, D.C., Congress provides plenty of drama for aficionados and the mass audience alike. The media, especially television, more often than not convey negatives about Congress – spawning “a kind of naive cynicism about the theatre – the ancient and necessary conceits – of politics.” As with the quadrennial presidential contest, media critics of Congress “trained to watch the drama focus obsessively on the backstage ropes and pulleys, . . . and seem to think they have discovered a radically new practice of politics in the age of video, but ’twas ever thus” (Starobin 1996: 2107).

Congress certainly was theatre on January 4, 1995. After forty years of Democratic control, in the 1994 midterm election the Republicans

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Great Theatre*

had regained power in the House of Representatives. Republican leaders had promised to push through a series of rules changes on the first day of the new, 104th Congress. To forestall Democratic obstruction, the Republican leadership scripted its actions for the first day of the Congress and carefully rehearsed a couple of days in advance. Then, on January 4, with the full attention of the media, the Republicans showed that they were able to change House rules in a single day, in vivid contrast with the deadlock that had characterized much of the Democratic 103rd Congress. This made great theatre, particularly when Newt Gingrich (R-GA) became Speaker and adopted a more public and combative persona than that of the previous Speaker, Democrat Tom Foley (WA). Speaker Gingrich, it is said, “wanted to see guerrilla theatre on the floor” (Duncan and Lawrence 1995: v).¹

However, Congress was theatre long before Newt Gingrich took the Speaker’s gavel in his hand. Congress has been theatre even before its proceedings began to be televised by C-SPAN. Indeed, Congress was theatre long before the invention of modern electronic media. Moments of drama, high and low, define the historical development of the institution. For its first meeting, held in temporary quarters in New York City, great impatience surrounded the House of Representatives as members waited for enough of their colleagues to arrive in the city to comprise a quorum sufficient to conduct the first business of the new nation. The House first officially convened in Federal Hall on Wednesday, April 1, 1789, when, at last, Representative Thomas Scott arrived from western Pennsylvania, completing the quorum. After much waiting and suspense, the House elected its first Speaker, Frederick A. C. Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania. On the evening of April 5, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia reached New York, completing the quorum in the U.S. Senate. Shortly thereafter, Speaker Muhlenberg led House members into the Senate chamber to count the electoral votes that made George Washington the first president of the United States.

Congress was theatre back when the American public followed congressional debates in the mid-nineteenth century, which pitted great orators like Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster against one another. Perhaps the most dramatic moments before the Civil War came as Congress, spurred by Clay’s leadership, adopted the provisions of the Compromise of 1850 that permitted California to enter the federal union free of the taint of slavery. After the midpoint of the nineteenth

¹ Congress was also theatre when the House met in early January 1997 to reelect Newt Gingrich as Speaker (after he had admitted to ethics violations) and again later that month to reprimand him, episodes that will be described in detail in Chapter 12.

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Congress in Action

century, the defining moment of congressional drama took place the day the Senate voted on the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson. On May 16, 1868, Senator Edmund G. Ross of Kansas cast the vote preventing adoption of the resolution that would have deposed the president. Ross himself described the scene:

The galleries were packed. Tickets of admission were at an enormous premium. The House had adjourned and all of its members were in the Senate chamber. Every chair on the Senate floor was filled with a Senator, a Cabinet Officer, a member of the President's counsel or a member of the House. (quoted in Kennedy 1956: 137).

Dramatic congressional moments have produced the great theatre of more recent memory. On December 8, 1941, the day after the infamous surprise attack by Japanese air and naval forces on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, members of Congress assembled to adopt a declaration of war against Japan. One House member, Jeannette Rankin of Montana, provided the lone vote against war; she had also voted against a declaration of war against Germany in 1917. On August 30, 1957, Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, then a Democrat, provided yet another dramatic moment in the Senate's history when he single-handedly filibustered in the Senate for a record 24 hours, 27 minutes, to try to kill a civil rights bill.

In 1974, the Watergate hearings and the impeachment proceedings against President Richard M. Nixon captivated Americans watching their television screens. The Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, chaired by Sam J. Ervin (D-NC), began the Watergate hearings in May 1973, investigating a presidential cover-up of a burglary of the Democratic Party campaign offices in the Watergate Building in Washington, D.C. The televised Watergate hearings provided Congress with the highest approval ratings it had received in a long time. On July 30, 1974, the House Judiciary Committee voted articles of impeachment against President Nixon, and on August 8, Nixon resigned.

The description of Congress as theatre goes far back in the history of the United States – to 1808, when President Thomas Jefferson wrote to William Wirt that “Congress is the great commanding theatre of this nation, and the threshold to whatever department of office a man is qualified to enter” (Lipscomb and Bergh 1903: 423–4). Wirt had just gained fame the previous year as prosecutor in the treason trial of Aaron Burr, and Jefferson was recommending to Wirt that if he wanted a political career, he should run for a seat in Congress. Instead, Wirt served as attorney general under Presidents James Monroe and John Quincy Adams and then, in 1832, ran against Andrew Jackson as the presidential candidate of the Antimasonic Party. But when he corresponded with

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Great Theatre*

his friend and political supporter in 1808, Jefferson recognized that Congress was to be the theatre of democracy, the stage on which policy and political debates are played out before the public.

We argue in this chapter that viewing Congress as theatre provides a useful perspective on what happens there that extends beyond the usual approaches to understanding. Congress is theatre because it plays to an audience, because it seeks to provide enlightenment just as theatre does, and because of the symbolic meaning of what happens on its stage. Congress is theatre in many respects, and viewing the institution in this way leads to insights that would otherwise be missed.

THE THEATRE METAPHOR

In arguing that Congress may be viewed as theatre, it is useful to make sure that there are some shared understandings of the nature of theatre. This is not a body of knowledge that is generally studied by political scientists in their professional lives, though we would expect and hope that most readers have more than a passing acquaintance with theatre in their nonprofessional lives. Therefore, this section will describe the history of theatre and its relationship to politics generally, as well as how we see this metaphor as useful in studying Congress more specifically.

The History of Theatre

According to Aristotle's treatise, *Poetics* (circa 330 B.C.), theatre can be traced back to the ceremonial worship of the god Dionysus in ancient Greece. The death and rebirth of the god were celebrated in a communal fashion, with a choral leader, Thespis (sixth century B.C.), assuming the part of the leading character in a choral hymn. Greek theatre was mainly religious, but it evolved over the following centuries, with comedy eventually supplanting tragedy as the main form and with individual actors becoming more important at the expense of the chorus.

Roman theatre picked up where Greek theatre left off. Some early Roman plays were meant to be read rather than acted, but by the second century A.D., Roman theatre emphasized spectacle. The Christian church attacked the Roman theatre as licentious, so the classical theatre came to an end with the fall of the Roman Empire in A.D. 476. Theatre developed anew in the medieval period in the religious milieu of the Catholic church, with mystery plays recounting Bible stories, miracle plays portraying the lives of saints, and morality plays imparting moral lessons. It was not until the Renaissance that nonreligious plays became prevalent.

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Congress in Action*

Politics has long been part of the theatre. Early Greek dramas, such as *Antigone*, were politically relevant. Shakespeare's histories used drama to retell stories from political history, whereas his tragedies often offered warnings about weaknesses of the state. Political intrigue provided the plot for many of the Shakespearean plays, most notably *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

This brief recital of the history of theatre is useful in reminding us that theatre serves several functions. It can provide religious ritual and moral teaching as well as offer entertainment and artistic expression. It can serve as an occasion for emotional catharsis while, at a more directly political level, it can bind a community together, provide direct political persuasion, and explore current political events and problems. On the other side of the coin, politicians have always recognized that they, too, must play to an audience.

Politics and Theatre

Of course, politics can be regarded as theatre whenever it is played out publicly. Congress does not provide the only theatrical stage in Washington. Presidential actions are theatre, too; even Supreme Court arguments and decisions can be regarded in this way. Campaign politics are also theatre. Politics can be viewed as theatre because it is readily interpreted symbolically and its symbolic aspects are theatre. However, it is also the case that politics is played out on a public stage in an attempt by politicians to elicit particular reactions from the watching populace, and that makes politics into theatre. Consider Samuel Johnson's (1747) statement about the theatre: "The stage but echoes back the public voice. The drama's laws the drama's patrons give, for we that live to please, must please to live." The concern with pleasing an audience to live is a common thread for politicians and actors. Politicians generally, and members of Congress in particular, are as concerned with the need to satisfy their audience as are actors, whether on- or off-Broadway.

The extent to which politics and theatre share common elements is visible in the definitions of each. Compare Harold Lasswell's classic definition of politics with Kenneth Burke's equally classic definition of the elements of drama. To Lasswell (1936), politics is a matter of "Who Gets What, When, How?" To Kenneth Burke (1945: xv), the elements of the "dramatistic pentad" are the act (what took place), the scene (the situation in which the act occurred), the agent (who performed the act), the agency (the means used to perform the act), and the purpose (why the act occurred). These two definitions are virtually identical. Both emphasize the actor (the "who" who serves as agent), the action (the "what" that constitutes that act) and the means (the "how" that pro-

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Great Theatre*

vides the agency for the act). The main difference between these schemes is that Lasswell focused on the time frame – the when – whereas Burke emphasized the purpose – the why – and the setting of the scene, the “where.” Yet we would expect that drama is also interested in the “when” (which Burke probably meant to include as part of the scene), while politics also must be concerned with the “why” and the “where”; thus, these two didactic schemes are even more similar than they may seem at first.

Congress as Theatre

The term *theatre* has several meanings. Theatre is variously defined as drama, the theatrical world, theatrical technique, a playhouse (the auditorium in which plays are performed), or, more generally, the place where events take place (e.g., a battlefield, as in the Pacific “theatre of operations” during World War II). At “an evening at a theatre,” said longtime *New Republic* drama critic Stark Young, “the dramatist’s share takes its place with the other elements that go to make up the art. Along with the acting, the decor and the directing goes the drama itself – all make up . . . the theatre art” (Young 1986: 12; see also Cameron and Hoffman 1969: 1–25).

Congress can be viewed as theatre in all of these senses. It is a playhouse in which drama occurs. Like the august chambers of the U.S. Supreme Court or the impressiveness of the White House’s Oval Office, the halls of Congress confer all of the dignity, authority, and independence that their public architecture can muster (see Goodsell 1988). Such massive, ornate, imposing public spaces, which are the stages for political discourse and decision making, help to mold and shape the behavior of political actors and potentially influence the citizenry, who provide the audience for government (see Edelman 1964: 108–10). Accordingly, “people are taught to see legislative halls, courtrooms, executive mansions, and even administrative offices as symbols of government by the people and equality before the law” (Edelman 1995: 77). Again, Congress can be viewed in the light of the social, political, cultural, or economic conflicts that are taken there to be resolved. It is viewed, thereby, as the battlefield on which important events take place, as “combat on the legislative terrain” (Gross 1953: 151). But more than anything else, Congress is theatre in the sense of providing drama.

Of course, televised congressional hearings can provide drama. Congressional debates can also provide drama, though most watchers of Congress on television’s C-SPAN probably also find them to be a good substitute for sleeping pills. Similarly, congressional debates in the 1800s

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Congress in Action*

were well covered by newspapers, when many of the main issues of the day were fought out in floor debates.

But Congress is not only theatre when it holds hearings or debates. Congress is always theatre and, as Jefferson maintained, it is great theatre. Congress provides the arena in which political issues can be fought out, and it provides the battlefield on which the leading political personalities of the day can make their marks and attract public attention. Whether the politicians are Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole, Ted Kennedy, and John Kasich in the 104th Congress or James Madison, Samuel Adams, Frederick Muhlenberg, and Patrick Henry in the very first, Congress has always provided the theatre in which the great scenes of American politics are played out.

While we are arguing that Congress is always theatre, during the 104th Congress, it was certainly great theatre, and the participants understood that they were playing to an audience. The Republicans gained control of the House largely through the strategizing of their new leader, Newt Gingrich. From the time he was first elected to the House in 1978, Gingrich consciously took steps to make the Republicans fight to become the majority party. Having succeeded, he wanted his majority to enact a series of laws that would change the course of government policy and would lead to a new conservative era in the United States. This required showing the nation that the new Republican majority in the House could make a difference, but that it had to be accompanied by a Republican president in order for its program to triumph. Thus, winning control of Congress was only to be the first step of gaining conservative ascendancy. Accomplishing this agenda required playing successfully to the watching public (see Gimpel 1996).

Theatre as a Metaphor for Studying Congress

The term “theatre” is originally derived from the Greek word *theatron*, (“a seeing place”), emphasizing that theatre is something that is seen in a special location. *Drama* comes from the Greek *drama*, for “action.” By contrast, *Congress* is derived from the Latin word *congressus*, for “a coming together.” Thus, the original usage implied that Congress involved a coming together of representatives, while theatre was a place for seeing action. In viewing Congress as theatre, then, our attention is subtly shifted from viewing the actions as real and important in their own right to viewing them as occurring for the viewing of others.

The biggest difference between theatre and Congress may seem to be that in the theatre, the playwright usually gives the actors a full script in advance, whereas there is usually no literal script in Congress. Of

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Great Theatre*

course, there is also “improvisational” theatre, in which actors are not given scripts but are just told the basic scene and are expected to work out the script as they proceed. In a real sense, that is very similar to Congress – the legislators know the situation when a new session of Congress begins, but after that, all must be improvised.

However, we would rather emphasize three similarities between theatre and Congress. First, and foremost, is the emphasis on the audience. The successful playwright knows what will sell to the audience in the theatre, while the successful member of Congress has learned what will sell to the political audience. The member of Congress plays to the public just as the actor plays to the audience.² Second, both institutions are intended to provide enlightenment to the audience. From the earliest days of Greek theatre, drama was intended to help educate the public. Congress similarly provides enlightenment to its audience, as its debates clarify the issues underlying legislation. Third, actions may not always mean what they seem. There can be a symbolic meaning to the plot of a play just as there is usually a symbolic element to actions in a legislature.

Another commonality between theatre and Congress involves the importance of the concept of representation. The distinction in drama is between “presentational theatre,” in which the theatricality is emphasized (as by making stage machinery visible) so that the audience always remembers that it is watching a play, and “representational theatre,” with realistic plots, characters, and scenery so that the audience is temporarily caught up in the illusion that what transpires on the stage is real. Representation in Congress also involves one thing being considered equivalent to another – here, not the play equivalent to reality, but, in some sense, the legislator equivalent to the constituent.

As we have suggested, each of the elements of theatre – the story, the audience, the director, the theatre building and stage, the actors, and the staging – is present in Congress as well. The Capitol building is the theatre building, with the Senate and House chambers providing two separate stages for action, where the rituals and symbols of politics and policy making unfold in civic space (see Goodsell 1988). The legislators are the actors, playing their roles as delegates, trustees, and politicians – interest-group advocates, president’s men and women, and clarion callers for a cause (see Davidson 1969; Wahlke et al. 1962). The committee meeting rooms are the rehearsal chambers in which behind-the-scenes actions shape what will happen when bills reach center stage (as described in Fenno 1973). The party leaders can serve as directors, though

2 Also, both actors and members of Congress can wear out their welcomes with their respective audiences, though no one has yet proposed term limits for actors.

Cambridge University Press

052158518X - Great Theatre: The American Congress in the 1990s

Edited by Herbert F. Weisberg and Samuel C. Patterson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Congress in Action*

sometimes action in Congress seems more like free theatre, in which every actor can take uncoordinated action – reminiscent of Edmund Burke’s description of plays as a republic in which anything goes.

To describe Congress as theatre suggests that it provides drama. The idea of drama implies a story with action and human melodrama. The action in Congress is a matter of attempting to pass legislation, while the human melodrama involves the interplay of powerful leaders and rank-and-file members in the consideration of that legislation. Thus, books on the passage of particular bills emphasize both the steps involved in passing the bills and the roles of particular members of Congress in getting them passed.

Because we have characterized congressional life as much like theatre does not mean that it is drama that always receives, or always deserves, rave reviews. Sometimes congressional theatre is bad theatre, being engaged in what Barbara Sinclair (in Chapter 8) calls “governing ugly.” Occasionally Congress “gives off” negative symbols, engages in farcical actions, or provides low comedy. Its performance has been malodorous – as when, in the aftermath of the Cold War, the House Un-American Activities Committee, led by a xenophobic, bullying chairman, Martin Dies, Jr. (D-TX), conducted witch hunts, whereby individuals were charged with disloyalty, with being Communist sympathizers, or with working as spies. By the same token, Congress gave off negative symbols in 1952, when Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (R-WI), chairman of the Senate’s Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, launched an anti-Communist crusade. By the end of the subcommittee hearings, the label “McCarthyism” denoted using congressional committee hearings as a platform for character assassination, sullyng of reputations, baseless defamation, unsubstantiated charges of disloyalty or other offenses, and, ultimately, disgrace to the Senate itself. The McCarthyism of the early 1950s gave new meaning to James Fenimore Cooper’s admonition, in *The American Democrat*, that “the true theatre of a demagogue is a democracy.”

Alternative Metaphors for Studying Congress

In proposing to study Congress through the theatre metaphor, we are clearly viewing much of what transpires there as symbolic (see Wilshire 1982: 30–7). By contrast, when Bertram Gross (1953) wrote his book, *The Legislative Struggle* (using a military metaphor borrowed from Clausewitz’s *On War*), he clearly took everything that happens in Congress at face value. Gross depicted great floor fights in Congress as the equivalent of great battles between opposing armies whose generals engaged in careful strategic thinking. On the other hand, the theatre motif