



Do Not Ask What Good We Do: Inside the U.S. House of Representatives

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The U.S. House of Representatives—a large, often unruly body of men and women elected every other year from 435 distinct microcosms of America—has achieved renown as “the people’s House,” the world’s most democratic institution, and an acute Rorschach of biennial public passions. In the midterm election year 2010, recession-battered Americans expressed their discontent with a simultaneously overreaching and underperforming government by turning the formerly Democratically controlled House over to the Republicans. Among the new GOP majority were eighty-seven freshmen, many of them political novices with Tea Party backing who pledged a more open, responsive, and fiscally thrifty House. What the 112th Congress instead achieved was a public standing so low—a ghastly 9 percent approval rating—that, as its longest-serving member, John Dingell, would dryly remark, “I think pedophiles would do better.” What happened?

Robert Draper explores this question just as he examined the Bush White House in his 2007 *New York Times* bestselling book *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush*—by burrowing deeply inside the subject, gaining cooperation of the major players, and producing a colorful, unsparingly detailed, but evenhanded narrative of how the House of Representatives became a house of ill repute. Draper’s cast of characters spans the full spectrum of political experience and ideologies—from the Democrat Dingell, a congressman since 1955 (though elbowed out of power by the party’s House leader, Nancy Pelosi), to Allen West, a black Republican Tea Party sensation, former Army lieutenant colonel, and political neophyte with a talent for equal opportunity offending. While unspooling the boisterous, at times tragic, and ultimately infuriating story of the 112th Congress, Draper provides unforgettable portraits of Gabrielle Giffords, the earnest young Arizona congresswoman who was gunned down by a madman at the beginning of the legislative session; Anthony Weiner, the Democrats’ clown prince and self-made media star until the New Yorker self-immolated in a sex scandal; the strong-willed Pelosi and her beleaguered if phlegmatic Republican counterpart, House Speaker John Boehner; the affable majority whip, Kevin McCarthy, tasked with instilling team spirit in the iconoclastic freshmen; and most of all, the previously unknown new members who succeeded in shoving Boehner’s Republican Conference to the far right and thereby bringing the nation, more than once, to the brink of governmental shutdown or economic default.

In this lively work of political narrative, Draper synthesizes some of the most talked-about breaking news of the day with the real story of what happened behind the scenes. This book is a timely and masterfully told parable of dysfunction that may well serve as Exhibit A of how Americans lost faith in their democratic institutions.

“Congress will rise June 1st, as most of us expect. Rejoice when that event is ascertained. If we should finish and leave the world right side up, it will be happy. Do not ask what good we do: that is not a fair question, in these days of faction.” —Congressman Fisher Ames, May 30, 1796

In *Do Not Ask What Good We Do*, Robert Draper captures the prophetic sentiment uttered by Fisher Ames over two centuries ago. As he did in writing about President George W. Bush in *Dead Certain*, Draper provides an insider’s book like no one else can—this time, inside the U.S. House of Representatives.

Because of the bitterly divided political atmosphere we live in, because of the combative nature of this Congress, this literary window on the backstage machinations of the House is both captivating and timely—revealing the House in full, from the process of how laws are made (and in this case, not made) to the most eye-popping cast of lawmakers Washington has ever seen.

Do Not Ask What Good We Do: Inside the U.S. House of Representatives Details

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From Reader Review Do Not Ask What Good We Do: Inside the U.S. House of Representatives for online ebook

Jay Connor says

The title of this excellent book by Robert Draper is based on a quote from a Congressman who was so frustrated with the “days of fraction” that he was not seeking re-election after his fifth term in the 5th Congress of 1796! Yikes.

Draper does a masterful job of understanding and projecting the push and pulls of the new 112th Congress brought in 2010 by the Tea Party wave. We travel with many of the new congressmen on their journey of discovery, while also looking over the shoulders of the old guard who are trying to control the result.

Draper's point is much larger than same-old, same-old that the Fisher Ames quote might indicate. Rather he explores, particularly through the eyes of the freshmen congressmen, the Alice and Wonderland world of appearance and deception that is today's politics.

As the Ames' quote makes abundantly clear, getting something accomplished in Congress is a cruel slog. What is different here, perhaps, is a meeting that Draper opens with. On Obama's Inauguration night, while the Democrats are celebrating at the Inaugural Balls, a small group of Republican leaders vow to do everything to thwart any of the efforts of the new president, whether that is consistent or inconsistent with their own ideology. On a very real level, the 2012 freshman are the result AND the victims of that evening.

I'll admit that you probably have to be a political junkie to really enjoy this stuff, but I would also assert that until we more fully understand the Escher inspired never-ending, circular staircase of Congressional action, we have very little chance of landing on successful outcomes, either there or as a country.

Karl Hafer, Jr. says

The vignettes that Draper paint in his incredible book do so much to explain just how and why any body of elected officials can exist with approval ratings as low as 8% (John Dingell is quoted as saying "I think pedophiles would do better"). This book does not have an axe to grind yet offers the reader information that only a true insider could have gleaned.

Hadrian says

This is a contemporary of the House of Representatives in the 112th Congress, with a particular focus on the Tea Party surge from 2010-2012, and the efforts over social entitlement reform, the debt ceiling crisis, and a partial government shutdown.

What a bunch of shits!

This is an agonizing detail of the negotiations and backroom deals which led to major policy decisions, and

provides a few mini-biographies of a few of the main figures, from the Dean of the House, who's been there since 1955, to the Tea Party darlings of Paul Ryan, Allen West, and Tim Duncan.

Draper is not overly cynical, and is almost sympathetic to all sides. However, he describes one of the worst cases of Congressional factionalism in decades, and the sorts of deals which need to be set in order to accomplish anything. The squabble over the debt ceiling is a thorough but painful read.

If you've been paying attention for the past few years you know the general outline of this case already. However, if you want more specific details about the workings of the Congress in this time, this is a reliable quick read.

Jonathan McNabb says

Reading a book about events that you lived and directly worked through is a new experience for me. We have all had ties to some book that we have read, whether it was about a national cause or a field of study that we enjoy. But as I read Robert Draper's *Do Not Ask What Good We Do* – a story of the Freshmen House Republicans' first year in Washington – I could not help but think back to the last year of my life with fondness and frustration.

The book follows a number of interesting figures in the 112th Congress including:

Rep. Allen West (R-FL)

Jeff Duncan (R-SC) (and the rest of the South Carolina freshman members)

John Dingell (D-MI)

Kevin McCarthy (R-CA)

Mr. Draper tells the story's of some of the freshmen classes more noticeable members and contrasts their lack of institutional knowledge with that of their most seniors colleagues, namely Rep. John Dingell, the Dean of the House of Representatives. The differences between these two groups is too numerous to fully list but include at the most common level the role of earmarks in the policy making process and at the apex their very world views.

The entire story is made possible by the Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy. A member of the so-called "Young Guns," Mr. McCarthy is charged with delivering votes on some of the House's most contentious bills with a surprising lack of resources (compared to previous generations) all while being one of the least experienced Whips in the history of the House. His knowledge and strong relationships with members of the freshmen class give Mr. Draper ample resources to round out this book.

Some of the more important back stories told within the book include:

Nancy Pelosi's reign as speaker

John Boehner's leadership style

President Obama's relationship with the House

Republican Leadership battles

Government Shutdown and Debt Ceiling fights

High Points

Mr. Draper focuses on the big issues that frame the 1st session of the 112th Congress and lets go of many of the details that cloud the larger picture. His anecdotes, through the telling of individual Member stories, provide insight into the world views of one of the most influential freshmen classes in the history of the

House.

Low Points

As a Capitol Hill staffer for a member (mentioned on page 129) with friends in offices that were mentioned, I can safely say that some of Mr. Draper's characterizations of the freshmen were shortsighted and in hindsight inaccurate. While I must add, none of this appears to be malicious, but rather the result of limited exposure.

Overall

If you are a political junkie – enough that you prefer the term “politico” – this book might be old hat for you. Keeping up with Politico and a combination of after-action reports published by the Washington Post can get you much of the same information at this point. But if you casually follow politics and want to understand more about how the House of Representatives really works, this is a fantastic read. At only 352 pages and \$18.50 dollars, Do Not Ask What Good We Do is a worth your time.

Lynette says

Wow. No matter how dysfunctional you think this Congress is, you will think it more so after reading this book. My thoughts upon completing it are to wonder how far our country will fall before Democrats and Republicans find a way to govern together. Do Not Ask What Good We Do is not biased in favor of either party, and, if anything, made me see those members whom I previously found odious as more human and, surprisingly, likable. Draper has written a fantastic book, great for gaining a better understanding of how Congress works, but also for understanding the current partisan deadlocks that have ground the U.S. government to a virtual halt.

Allison Hiltz says

I first heard about this book after an interview with the author on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. I was intrigued by Stewart's comment about politicians being "real people" and decided that I should read the book. I must admit, it was really good. Given, it was good in a, "now I am frightened about the state of our country" way, but it was still good. The book mostly follows the Republican/Tea Party freshman that were voted into office during the 2010 midterm elections.

I enjoyed it because it offered some insight about a select few individuals that helped me to understand why they do and vote the way that they do. Granted, what they do isn't effective nor efficient (as illustrated by the book), but it offers insight nonetheless. The book has a liberal slant at times, but for the most part it stays pretty middle of the road and keeps the reader interested. This book had the potential of being very dry, but the author and his way of telling the stories keeps the reader engaged from start to finish.

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Michael says

[http://philadelphiareviewofbooks.com/...](http://philadelphiareviewofbooks.com/)

Allen West has no shortage of commentary on the foreign and economic policy of the President of the United States, and in recent weeks, he has busied himself with spouting his opinions on any issue of note to anyone listening. The congressman from Florida's 22nd district, both a member of the Tea Party Caucus and the only current Republican member of the Congressional Black Caucus, a former combat officer in the Iraq War and civilian advisor to the Afghan National Army, does not shy away from controversy. He relishes it, and basks in the glowing adoration of his ultra-conservative supporters.

On Thursday, September 6, West's campaign against the Democratic challenger for his congressional seat released an ad attempting to capitalize on the voice vote at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte to amend the party platform to include language concerning God and identifying Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. As viewers and many pundits noted, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa called for the vote three consecutive times from the podium and each time the "No" voted sounded louder than the "Yes" vote. As chairman, Villaraigosa passed the amendment based on his own judgment of the voice vote and received a booing chorus. West's television ad ends with white text on a black background, intercut with footage from the convention and ominous music. "Three times they said no to God," it reads. "That's Patrick Murphy's party. Are those your values?" This from the party that is, by all accounts, losing the culture war.

On Friday, September 7, West called President Obama's speech at the DNC an "utter failure" on his Facebook page, and continued "If America reelects Barack Obama to a second term, we deserve all the pain and misery that will ensue," in another post. This from one of the shining stars of the Tea Party.

On the night of Sunday, September 9, at a speech to the Republican Jewish Coalition in Boca Raton, West said, "We have a vice president that stood up there and told the American people that we have turned the corner. The only corner that we have turned is to go onto the road to perdition, and we are going down that sucker like a bat out of hell." This from the party of "Mission Accomplished" and staged aircraft carrier landings.

At the same meeting, West equated Obama's campaign slogan "Forward" to a "Soviet Union, Marxist-Socialist theme" claiming that this election would decide "whether or not we continue to be a Republic, governed by the Constitution, and individual sovereignty, or will we become a liberal-progressive bureaucratic nanny-state." This continues a long-stated argument from the Right about Obama's socialist agenda, which, aided by the media's attempts at balanced reporting, has successfully moved political discussion to the right, fulfilling Republicans' claims by making a moderate like Obama seem radically liberal.

On Thursday, September 13, on Fox News, West said, "What you see coming from President Obama and the Obama administration is what they call dhimmitude in the Islamic world. When you look at the speech he gave at Turkey, when you look at his bowing to the Saudi king and the interaction there, when you look at the speech that he gave at the University of Cairo, they see weakness, and as Governor Palin said, they see a policy of appeasement." This came two days after rioters killed the U.S. Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens and three American security officers at the Benghazi consulate. In this statement, West, by most accounts a more serious-minded, if dramatic, politician, shows that he not only draws economic principles from Palin, but also foreign policy ideals from the old VP candidate. Furthermore, the term "dhimmitude," popularized by the right-wing pseudohistorical works of Bat Ye'or, an Egyptian-born British Jew, was

credited originally to the leader of a right-wing Maronite Christian paramilitary group called the Lebanese Phalanges Party. Islamophobic much? West would deny the pertinence or possibility of this more common neologism.

In the same interview, West said, “What we need to do is to have a very harsh, diplomatic stance, first and foremost, to get our American citizens, get these embassies closed down. And we probably need to look at the representatives and diplomats from these countries, and tell them to go home and figure out what they are going to do, as far as the relations that they are going to have with the United States of America, and how they are going to control radical Islamism in their countries.” He’s sounding less and less like a miserly Tea Partier and more like a hawkish neocon. Russia, the country his party’s nominee called America’s “number one geopolitical foe,” by West’s standards, does a great job of controlling radical elements within its borders. Such mixed messages.

In his Weekly Republican Address on Saturday, September 15, West defended the oddly-juxtaposed but perfectly Tea Party bill he introduced to the House – the National Security and Job Protection Act. “This week, the Republican-led House of Representatives continued to focus on jobs – and removing government barriers that make it harder to create jobs, such as the small business tax hike President Obama has proposed that threatens our already struggling economy.” He continued, “I spent 22 years in active duty service in the United States Army and served in several combat zones. I cannot underestimate the amount of damage these cuts would do to our military. They would essentially hollow out our armed forces. What that means is, we would have the smallest ground force since 1940, the smallest Navy since 1915, and the smallest tactical fighter force in the history of the modern United States Air Force.” West failed to remark on how the converse cuts in the social safety net proposed by Republicans will affect the middle class and the poor. Of course, the RNC roll call of politicians bragging about how their parents made it through tough times (never the politicians themselves, you might note) ignored the presence of the most robust social safety net in American history which helped those workers from previous generations rise above those flaunted humble beginnings.

Of course the government-funded jobs provided for both of West’s parents and two of his brothers (and himself) were all military, so his cut-everything-but-defense brand of conservatism can’t come as a surprise.

Robert Draper’s new book, *Do Not Ask What Good We Do: Inside the U.S. House of Representatives* focuses a critical, yet understanding eye on the freshmen class of representatives, mostly hardline Tea Party members, elected in the sea change election of 2010. Allen West may be the most prominent member of this group, but he by no means crowds out the rest in Draper’s riveting narrative account of the last two years of legislative dysfunction and obstruction.

Do Not Ask What Good We Do starts with a prologue, a dinner at the Caucus Room, a D.C. steakhouse, the night of President Barack Obama’s inauguration on January 20, 2009. The attendees – a cabal of sorts – all Republican office-holders or party operatives, include Eric Cantor, Paul Ryan, Jim DeMint, Tom Coburn, Newt Gingrich, Fred Barnes, and Frank Luntz, and the agenda for the evening, and the rest of Obama’s first term, comes down to one item – get Obama out of the White House in 2012. In the intervening years, these staunch, but still mainline, conservatives used the emergence of the Tea Party and the spread of their support to win back the House of Representatives and change the public dialogue about health care, the deficit, the social safety net, and the success or failure of the U.S. economic rebound under President Obama. Little did they know that unleashing a horde of fiercely conservative and idealistic freshman legislators into Congress would not only thwart the plans of the president and the Democratic Senate, but also tidily derail the efforts of more senior Republicans to pass bills shrinking government.

The vitriol and vigilance of the Tea Party, embodied by Allen West’s call to arms, during his campaign, to

attack the enemy with sharpened bayonets, is startling. What's more startling is the identity of West's, and the Tea Party's, enemies – not only liberal and moderate Democrats, but also moderate Republicans. Soldiers like West do not compromise on the battlefield, and to him and his cohort of freshman Tea Partiers, the halls of Congress are the ultimate battlefield.

But Congress works in a different reality than war, and the rest of the world. The messy process of legislation, which includes earmarks and other favors and the cronyism of all the committees, proves much too strong and entrenched for the freshmen with their big ideas. Much of Draper's narrative hinges on this complex interplay between idealism – which he seems to think is admirable, no matter how misguided – and realpolitik. Jeff Duncan, one of West's fellow freshman, representing South Carolina's 3rd district, holds the Tea Party line even more firmly than West. Duncan insists on prayers before every Republican meeting he attends and blocks any legislation that compromises whatsoever (even when it's still shrinking government). One never doubts his sincerity, but that sincerity and devotion to economic precepts bred in the belly of Sarah Palin and a million other Tea Partiers allows him to legislate destructively and irresponsibly. Ideals have killed millions. Compromise has made the world turn. But the Tea Partiers in *Do Not Ask What Good We Do* deny this, as they deny all of American history between the founding of the Republic and the presidency of Ronald Reagan (a rampant government grower, one might add).

The actual business of the House is much more like a freeform chess match than warfare, with abstentions and present votes and procedural strategy. This has little to do with ideas, and like Michael Lewis, Robert Draper allows big personalities, like Kevin McCarty, Sheila Jackson Lee, Paul Ryan and Nancy Pelosi tell the story for him. Draper brings to life so many characters on the floor of the House, from Brooklyn tough Anthony Weiner, to leather-faced, chain-smoking, merlot-gulping John Boehner, that Congress becomes a menagerie of fools. When Weiner collapses and resigns under the weight of revelations about photos he circulated to young women on the internet, one can't help but see, at least in retrospect, and with the benefit of Draper's vivid picture of a man driven to power by an insatiable hunger for influence, that the Greek tragedy has concluded as it must. Weiner showed so much promise as a rogue legislator that only faults in his private life, not a savvy politic opponent (of which he had many), could bring him down. And then when Boehner breaks down and withdraws from talks with Obama over compromises over the debt ceiling, we see a man in love with the old way of politicking sabotaged by the guerilla tactics of his own party – not the enemy. In fact, in Allen West's equation, Boehner qualifies handily as the enemy – a Republican willing to compromise to get laws passed.

Draper provides enough small bits of House history, such as Josiah Walls's Reconstruction-era term, to put Allen West's role and strange relationship with the Congressional Black Caucus in perspective. Maybe it's less shocking then that someone of West's political persuasion should be the first black person elected to represent any Florida district in the United States Congress since Walls left in 1876. (I'll be wrapping my head around that for a while.)

The irony with the freshman Tea Partiers, as with all ideologue conservatives, is that they run on fiscal responsibility and government shrinkage, but fight tooth and nail to get funding for their own projects. And who has to fight to raise taxes to fund these projects? You guessed it. Congressional Democrats like John Dingell, who has served Michigan's 15th district since 1955. Dingell's practice of some underhanded legislative maneuvering seems justified by the great environmental good he accomplishes. In Congress, the ends do justify the means, and the Tea Party might have had more success in shrinking the deficit and passing a responsible budget if they understood this.

Draper shows great scope in *Do Not Ask What Good We Do* by packing the day-to-day functions of a representative into tight, fast-paced narratives and allowing these smaller stories add up the big picture of

Congress. Big deal stories, such as Gabby Giffords getting shot and Anthony Weiner showing his wiener are just landmarks in the full narrative of the House in one year, the first year of the Republican majority. Particularly in the political squabble over raising the debt ceiling, which was all but inevitable, the nature of legislating under the constant cloud of reelection and pleasing certain constituents proves too much for anyone to subvert, especially in the majority party. The tension between freshmen Tea Partiers like Jeff Duncan and Allen West and more mainline conservatives like John Boehner and Jo Ann Emerson, highlights the shift in political parties to a firm and immovable resistance to compromise. The Tea Partiers get this from Ayn Rand, after all. They can't think unselfishly and work in human institutions (of which Congress is supposed to be the most human.)

Let's hope we're not doomed to another two years of this dysfunction.

Mlg says

An insider's look at the last four years of Congressional inaction. It focuses more on the Tea Party freshmen House members than anyone else. Their refusal to compromise frustrates Boehner, as Cantor plots to take Boehner's place. Obama comes off as weak and naive, thinking he can compromise with the Republicans. He offers them deal after deal, irritating his own Democrats. If the Progressives have a hero it has to be Nancy Pelosi, who is the strongest advocate for the Democratic base. Yes, she caves in too when the party demands it, but at least she tries to stand up for preserving Medicare and Social Security. In the end, like sausages, you don't want to know how bills get passed. It'll just give you indigestion. As long as the Republicans insist on bills like Resolution 13 which reaffirmed "In God we Trust" as the official motto of the US, stating "there are few things Congress could do that would be more important than passing this resolution", the people who need work or help with their mortgages are out of luck and the approval rating of Congress will stay below 10%.

Damian says

An inside view of the first year or so of the 112th House of Representatives, i.e. the 2010 Tea Party House. Written in admirably unbiased style, the book follows a handful of GOP House freshmen through the travails of 2010 and 2011, the euphoria of the landslide midterms, the Anthony Wiener scandal, through the debt-ceiling debate and up to the 2011 State of the Union. Those freshmen include Allan West, the ex-marine Tea Party rep from Florida (famous for saying crazy shit, most recently that many of the democrats in the house are "Communists") and Jeff Duncan, the only House rep with a perfect 100 score for the Heritage Foundation in 2010.

All of these characters, despite views which to me seem ... em, unintuitive, come off sympathetically. All are in their own way idealistic about changing the machine and passionate about representing their constituents. And all in their own way face clashes not just with the opposing party -- that's to be expected after all -- but with their own leadership.

If the book does one thing right, it shows the near impossibility of governing, even in the best of circumstances, over a giant body of 400+ different egos and agendas.

Geoffrey Kabaservice says

The United States House of Representatives is one of those institutions that forever seems to be going downhill. Representative Fisher Ames of Massachusetts, a member of the first Federal Congress, had praised the original House for having “less party spirit, less of the acrimony of pride when disappointed of success, less personality, less intrigue, cabal, management, or cunning than I ever saw in a public assembly.” By 1796, however, Ames despaired of the growing ideological conflict in the House that had given rise to the two-party system. “Do not ask what good we do,” he wrote; “that is not a fair question, in these days of faction.”

Ames’ lament provides the somewhat cumbersome title of Robert Draper’s collective portrait of the House of Representatives in the 2011-12 legislative session. The title, and the historical snippets that Draper weaves into the book, suggest that there’s nothing new about the ideological warfare, scandal, tragedy, and partisan gridlock that characterized the House during the 112th Congress. The People’s Institution, as the lower house of the legislative branch has been known since its earliest days, has always been a better reflection of the American people than the Senate. As any semblance of an American consensus withers, and as the citizenry becomes increasingly politically polarized and self-segregates into mutually hostile clusters of lifestyles and beliefs, we should expect the House to follow suit.

Yet throughout its history the House has regarded itself as the body where most of the government’s business gets transacted. It’s the pragmatic, deal-cutting counterpart to the Senate – “the cave of the winds,” in the scornful characterization of Rep. John Dingell, the Michigan Democrat who has served in the House longer than any other American. But the 112th Congress, in the view of many political observers, was the most dysfunctional and least productive Congress in history (at least until the present Congress). It passed fewer laws, was more ideologically divided, and demonstrated less bipartisan cooperation than any Congress at least since World War II. In the summer of 2011, House Republicans, pressured by the angry populism of the Tea Party movement, created an impasse over the usually routine procedure of raising the statutory debt limit ceiling, thereby threatening to create a global financial crisis and resulting in the first ever downgrade of the United States’ credit rating. Unsurprisingly, the Congress has set records for unpopularity. Dingell speculated that even pedophiles would score higher than the legislative branch’s 9 percent public approval rating. So there is something new and unpleasant about the House, and *Do Not Ask What Good We Do* offers some insights into what has gone wrong.

Draper, a magazine reporter and author of a 2007 book about George W. Bush, approached his topic by attending House floor debates and press conferences as well as interviewing current and former House members and a number of senior staffers. Given the results of the 2010 elections, which resulted in the Republicans retaking control of the House, Draper pays more attention to the GOP than to the Democrats. Unlike Linda Killian’s *The Freshmen*, which focused exclusively on the Republicans who entered the House in the wake of Newt Gingrich’s 1994 triumph, Draper does not limit his cast of characters to the new members who rode into Congress on a wave of tea. He looks at the leadership of both parties as well as some more senior members, including Jo Ann Emerson of Missouri, one of the House’s few remaining moderate Republicans, and Dingell, who comes across as a genuine wise man. Gabrielle Giffords and Anthony Weiner appear largely because of the horrifying and embarrassing incidents, respectively, that befell them. The GOP freshmen are represented principally by Allen West of Florida, a cashiered Army lieutenant colonel with a telegenic talent for outrageous statements; Jeff Duncan of South Carolina, whom the Heritage Action for America group rated the most conservative House member; Blake Farenthold of Texas, a sometime radio talk show host; and Renee Elmers of North Carolina, a former intensive care nurse. Draper seems to have had the best access to West and Duncan; as he follows them around their offices and back home to their

districts, the reader is privy to their scribbled notes and even some of their alleged innermost thoughts.

Most embedded reporters come to like the people they bed down with, and Draper provides a largely sympathetic view of the representatives. A notable exception is Nancy Pelosi, who did to the Democrats what Newt Gingrich did to the Republicans in terms of centralizing power in the Speakership and overriding seniority rules to depose chairmen like Dingell whose ideological orthodoxy and personal fealty to Pelosi was questionable. Draper also offers an extremely unflattering characterization of Sheila Jackson Lee, the vainglorious Houston congresswoman who seems in every way an inferior version of her predecessor, Barbara Jordan. But Draper gives a three-dimensional portrait of the controversial West, whose warrior-puffery and incessant use of military metaphors (most of them monstrously inappropriate to democratic politics) are offset by his independent stance on matters such as cutting the defense budget and his skepticism about conventional politics. Budget Committee chair Paul Ryan is presented as a serious policy intellectual and an “honest seeker of solutions,” and the House Majority Whip, Kevin McCarthy of California, comes across as an effective mentor and cheerleader for the eighty-seven GOP freshmen. Duncan, despite his extreme conservatism, is depicted as a sort of Congressional everyman: hardworking, well-meaning, and understandably frustrated by the difficulty of making an impact in the House and with the broader public.

Even so, some of the portraits Draper offers cast doubt on his subjects’ understanding of the American political system and even their fitness for office. Draper doesn’t provide much background on or analysis of the Tea Party movement, but he implies that those representatives who are most influenced by it constitute a different breed from past legislators. For one thing, many seem to consider the conservative movement, and its media and funding outlets, to be their primary constituency. The media dictates the priorities of conservatives nationwide – hence the otherwise inexplicable fact that Renee Ellmers won election in 2010 because the most significant hot-button issue in rural North Carolina was the proposal to build a mosque near Ground Zero in lower Manhattan. Once in office, House members seek media attention by making hyperbolic partisan pronouncements, demonstrating what Farenthold calls a willingness “to set your hair on fire in front of the TV camera.” Deviations from the conservative line are dangerous, since they might invite a primary challenge in districts that are constantly being redrawn to make them more uniformly ideological. The traditional duties of legislators – debating with the opposition, passing laws, following party leadership and the institutional norms of Congress, tending to the needs of their districts – go by the wayside.

Draper gives plenty of examples of the freshmen Republicans’ willingness to disregard their party leadership and the facts in pursuit of their ideological aims, particularly in relation to the debate over raising the debt ceiling. On one occasion, several freshmen ridiculed an economist and former undersecretary of the Treasury brought in by the GOP leadership to brief them on government finances when his data contradicted their beliefs. Others claimed that the government was lying about running out of money, or that no ill effects would stem from the country defaulting on its debt, or that default was a necessary curative to excessive spending. The freshmen were oblivious to the fact that legislation must be at least minimally acceptable to Democrats to receive Senate approval, and generally seem to have shrugged off the surly bonds of reality and touched the face of pure ideology.

The GOP leadership’s sporadic efforts to educate the freshmen came to naught, in Draper’s telling, because Speaker John Boehner had no leverage over them, for reasons that range from the prohibition against earmarks to the likelihood that any attempt to discipline them would provoke a coup against Boehner, abetted by the Iago-like majority leader Eric Cantor. But one wonders if Boehner wasn’t using the intransigence of the Tea Partiers during the debt ceiling negotiations with President Obama as a sort of updated version of Richard Nixon’s “madman strategy”: give the freshmen enough cuts or they’ll destroy the economy! Democrats for their part acceded to Republican demands (in 2011 if not in 2013) because they

were less internally unified than the GOP and, as the party of government, had more to lose from the public perception that government doesn't work.

Draper's narrative is unfailingly entertaining and succeeds in humanizing the House at what may appear in retrospect to have been a turning point in its history. But one wishes that he had pushed back harder against some of his subjects, particularly the GOP freshmen, rather than taking all of their pronouncements at face value. Jeff Duncan, for example, denounced the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP) as "disgraceful and un-American" when he was campaigning in 2010. What if anything would he have proposed the government do to address the financial crisis? Would Duncan have voted against the auto bailout, even if that would have decimated the auto parts industries in his district? Does Duncan go along with the conservative demand to abolish the Department of Energy, even though the department's Savannah River Site nuclear reservation is his district's largest employer? Draper includes an amusing vignette about the inability of Duncan and the other South Carolina Republican freshmen to secure government funding for deepening the port at Charleston harbor until they were rescued by the state's lone Democrat, James Clyburn, who used his connections to overcome the earmark ban. Did Duncan learn anything from the episode? Will the Republicans develop a more inclusive approach to governing now that the 2013 shutdown and debt ceiling hostage crisis appear to have backfired spectacularly on the GOP? Do Not Ask What Good We Do is most useful as a foretaste of worse things to come.

Michael Barker says

A great book for a political junkie like me. This is filled with "inside congress" stories about the the 2011 session of the House of Representatives.

Carolyn says

An inside look at the utterly dysfunctional 112th Congress. History should not look kindly on this 'August' body

Great access. Good reporting

Megan says

Informative book about the 2010-2012 U.S. House of Representatives- read at the risk of getting angry.

"What made 2010 different was a rising tide of economic distress, coupled with the growing belief that the Democrats were only making things worse. Unlike many of the other Blue Dogs, Giffords had voted for the complete unholy trinity: stimulus, cap-and-trade, and health care. The latter vote set off an ugly conflagration of attacks- the very least of which were snarky ads featuring a Pelosi double instructing a Giffords stand-in who would bleat, "Whatever you say, mama Nancy." More ominously, an anonymous assailant blew out the windows on her district office. Sarah Palin's PAC website showed a map of congressional districts with crosshairs covering twenty of them, representing Democrats who had voted for health care. Arizona's 8th district was one of them. Giffords went on MSNBC to warn Palin that "there's consequences to that action."

(36)

-I remember hearing about this after Giffords was shot. It made me so upset. Knowing more about the situation just makes it worse.

"Obama had made a strategic mistake, McCarthy thought, picking a fight with Paul Ryan (on the budget). "I think Ryan's in his head," he would say. "Think about it. Ryan's a young guy. Ryan's risen fast. Ryan's got a great family. Ryan's got a lot of comparisons to the rise of where the president is. It's not so smart to raise him up by picking him as an enemy." (143)

-Ryan is featured quite a bit in this book. It was interesting to read about him now that he's Romney's VP pick.

"And she (Pelosi) had resisted the temptation to say "I told you so" to Obama- who, back in December, had disagreed with the Speaker's belief that they should raise the debt ceiling during that lame-duck session. The president's belief had been that the Republicans would and should be equal partners in the debt ceiling discussion- implying, she thought, that he believed the Republicans would treat the matter in a reasonable fashion." (259)

-This totally makes sense to me. Whenever Republicans tell me how radical they think Obama is, I just have to laugh inside because I really believe he was trying to be centrist and work with the Republicans as much as he could.

"In short, whatever pressures to govern the freshmen faced were drowned out by pressures from the right. On top of that, their reelection fortunes depended on money from conservative donors. Blake Farenthold had raised a meager \$102,000 during the third quarter of 2011. Farenthold couldn't stand asking people for money and was troubled by a system that dictated raising and spending a million dollars every two years so as to keep one's seat." (271)

-A million dollars every Congressional campaign. Infuriating. We need campaign finance reform yesterday.

"The Florida freshmen (West) wasn't quite sure what vision was being articulated on November 1, when the Republican leadership brought to the floor House Concurrent Resolution 13, which reaffirmed "In God We Trust" as the official motto of the United States. "There are few things Congress could do that would be more important than passing this resolution," cosponsor Lamar Smith intoned." (272-273)

-Seriously?! The guy seriously believes this was one of the best things Congress could have been doing?
Aargh!

Judie says

DO NOT ASK WHAT WE DO

The evening of January 20, 2009, 15 white males and their spouses met at an expensive restaurant in Washington DC. Seven of the men were Congressmen (Eric Cantor, Kevin McCarthy, Paul Ryan, Pete Sessions, Jeb Hensarling, Pete Hoekstra, and Dan Lungren); five were Senators (Jim DeMint, Jim Kyle, Tom Coburn, John Ensign, and Bob Corker); journalist Fred Barnes, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and

communications specialist Frank Luntz, who had organized the meeting, completed the group. The men were in shock by the election of Barack Obama who had been inaugurated earlier that day and they were trying to figure out how to get the White House back into Republican hands. They decided to stick together, highlight any problem faced by a Democrat official, and challenge the Democrats on every issue. Their decision would have an amazing effect on The United States during the next four years.

In DO NOT ASK WHAT WE DO, Robert Draper follows the 112 U.S. House of Representatives during its first year. The year began with the induction of 98 new Representatives and ended with the failure of Congress to enact a budget and the US Credit rating being downgraded from AAA to AA+.

The book examines the styles of numerous players and how they affected Congress and, by extension, America.

Kevin McCarthy, the House Whip, observed that many of the new Congressmen were risk takers. He identified "... Two types of leaders. One was a thermometer who could accurately discern the temperature in the room. The other type of leader was a thermostat, who could actually change the environment. Obama was a thermostat. He saw himself as an entrepreneur, a creator of wealth and jobs."

Among attempts made for both parties to work together were getting-to-know-you dinners between freshman and senior members. At the end of 2010, Nancy Pelosi thought they should raise the debt ceiling in the lame duck congress. President Obama disagreed and thought the Republicans would and should be equal partners in the discussion and would tread the matter in a reasonable fashion. Part of President Obama's plan was eliminating tax cuts for wealthy. The Republicans wouldn't pass it even though a majority of Republican voters approved.

That should not have been a surprise. In 2007 and 2008 20% of Republicans voted against their own budget because it didn't meet their terms. Chris Van Hollen stated. "I think the Republicans are going to pay a very heavy price for (automatic defense cuts) because of the extreme lengths they were prepared to go. The American people saw that they were literally willing to jeopardize the creditworthiness of the US in order to try and force upon the country their budget plans."

The Democrats decided they couldn't please the Republicans no matter what they did. Their votes were needed to pass many Republican sponsored bills but there was support for the Democrat's bills in return. Among the pressures on the Republican Congressman was that the majority of fund raising profits were given to Conservative favorites.

Imagine what would happen to an organization when a large group of high ranking middle managers are brought in and have their own agenda. Many have made promises about what they will accomplish without considering how much power their co-workers will give them. They refuse to compromise and maintain an adversarial position within the entire group, concentrating on the wishes of their small constituency despite differing views and needs of the entire population that they represent. As one would expect, things would not go their way, things that should be accomplished fail, and everyone becomes angry and frustrated. That is the sad story of the 112th Congress.

Alicia Brooks says

Worth it for the John Dingell quotes alone, it's a great inside look at the new class of congressman and how their unwillingness to compromise leads to deadlock every time. It also illustrates the huge divide between the older class and the freshman who don't know or don't care how it used to be done.
