For 75 years and counting, students on the Washington Study Group have witnessed politics and history in the making.

**By James Leach**

As an intern in the Washington office of Florida Senator George LeMieux, Matt Scheer ’11 had an insider’s view of the legislative process as health care reform made its way through Congress this year.

Scheer — a self-described political junkie — was one of 15 students on the 2010 Washington Study Group, the latest edition of a program conceived in 1935 by Professor Paul Jacobsen as “a laboratory in political science.” This year’s group, led by Professor Stanley Brubaker, continued a 75-year tradition of Colgate students being at the source as history unfolds. “Living it day to day was incredible,” said Scheer.

Since Jacobsen described the inaugural study group in the 1937 *Journal of Higher Education*, the goal has remained remarkably consistent: “The fundamental purpose of this off-campus study was to give the student an opportunity to see the government at work — to learn how it operates by watching ‘the wheels go round’ from vantage points of intimate contact and association with the officials.”

“I feel enormous continuity when I read Paul Jacobsen’s article,” said Brubaker, who has led 19 of the groups since 1986. “Reading what he said, you realize the importance of choosing your parents wisely.”

Widely regarded as the first study group offered in Washington by any college or university, Jacobsen’s experiment was also Colgate’s first semester-long off-campus experience. It became the model for a distinguishing feature of the modern academic program; today, nearly two in every three Colgate students participate in one or more of the university’s 20-plus faculty-led study groups in the United States and abroad.

More than 60 Washington Study Group alumni responded to an e-mail inviting reminiscences for this story. Their comments illustrate the program’s impact on participants’ lives across seven decades.

**Capacity for judgment**

Throughout its history, the study group has melded rigorous study with practical experience. Working from “basic textbooks and supplementary readings,” wrote Jacobsen, students in that first study group “secured a balanced viewpoint representing both the theoretical and the practical, the close-up and the long-range perspective.”

With that same balance as a constant goal, the syllabus has evolved to include two courses and a detailed case study in addition to the required 12-week internship. During their first two weeks in Washington, today’s students are immersed in a daily seminar titled “Our Changing Constitutional Order,” which Brubaker describes as covering “a week’s worth of material in each class meeting.”

Texts on the five-page-long reading list include the U.S. Constitution, *The Federalist Papers*, works on historical realignments of the political parties, a couple dozen of the Supreme Court’s “greatest hits,” Antonin Scalia’s *A Matter of Interpretation*, and the daily *Washington Post*, among many others.

That course and an eight-week seminar on political organization (Readings and Research on American Government) sharpen students’ understanding of their experience. “We want our courses to help students understand that some of what they see is ephemeral,” said Brubaker. “We want students to develop a capacity for judgment as citizens — to make the distinction between what’s new and what’s important.”

In the final seven weeks of the semester, overlapping their internships, students examine a contemporary policy issue in depth. Through extensive reading and a series of interviews with key players from government, interest groups, think tanks, and the media, students hone their understanding of the substance and politics of a chosen issue. Then, operating like a congressional committee and following parliamentary procedure, the students mark up a bill that is central to the issue at hand.

This year’s group researched President Obama’s health care plan. Earlier groups have studied such topics as reinventing government, impeachment, and campaign finance. Joel Omansky ’00 said his group’s examination of Social Security “was the first time something I was studying had direct real-world implications. It was a fascinating insight into how Washington works, in a way that a policy textbook could never quite describe.”

“The students get to be impressive experts on these subjects,” said Brubaker, “and when they interview someone, they knock their socks off.” While studying constitutional aspects of the War on Terror, the 2006 study group interviewed Georgetown’s David Cole, the principal author of a statement by major law professors who opposed wiretapping by the National Security Agency. “Cole commented that in all of the interviews he had had on the subject — with congressional staff, members of Congress, and the media — he had never been asked such astute and informed questions,” wrote Brubaker in that year’s annual report.

**Hands on**

Just as academic work enlightens students’ internships, the real-world internships enrich their understanding of the political science literature, said Brubaker. The Readings and Research on American Government seminar contributes to this exchange by providing background on organizational theory and decision-making, at the same time bringing students together to discuss and compare their internships.

Bert Levine ’63, a former Washington lobbyist who now teaches political science at Rutgers, has led the group three times. “Lots of schools see
internships as a kind of vocational preparation,” said Levine. “Colgate makes the internships a part of the academic experience, bringing that discussion into the seminar room to amplify and add nuance.”

Today, Washington-based Robert Samuels, a PhD with extensive government agency experience, assists the study group directors in overseeing the details of the internship program and teaching in the readings and research seminar.

Professor Joseph Wagner, who led a group in the late 1980s, describes the approach to internships as having “a liberal arts emphasis. We engage students in seeing the world not just as practical problems that need solutions, but as intellectual puzzles about what makes government work. We develop their understanding of how difficult it is to run a democracy.”

Working 30 to 40 hours a week in political offices, government agencies, think tanks, or in the media, students have a wealth of practical experiences to draw on. Tricia Keith Baione ‘99 had been interning in the White House press office for just ten days when the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke. As an intern in the foreign affairs division of the Library of Congress, Bill Schmeh ’59 drafted speeches for members of the House and Senate. Chas Schmitz ’01 was interning in Sen. Joseph Lieberman’s press office when Al Gore picked Lieberman as his running mate.

Donald Foley ’38 grew up in Hamilton, the son of a faculty member. He wrote of the 1936 group, “It was a particularly wonderful experience for me to get this immersion in the out-there world of Washington.”

Frank Godson ’48 wrote of Washington Study Group creator Paul Jacobsen: “Jake knew that by seeding a young mind with unforgettable experiences, understanding would be reaped years later.”
(Schmitz also interned in the clerk’s office at the Supreme Court). After being fired from a summer job for unionizing the dish room at Jackson Lake Lodge in Grand Teton National Park, Ted Vaill ’62 interned at the concessions management division of the National Park Service (payback ensued).

Between internships and the academic workload, “It’s an enormously complicated, taxing thing these students do,” said Professor Tim Byrnes, who led the groups in 2008 and 2009. He selected student participants on the basis of academic performance, personal flexibility, and interest. “Especially in Washington, you need a group who are going to take their responsibility seriously,” he said. “They are going to represent Colgate in the highest rungs of professional institutions.”

Kelly McKallagat ’05 acknowledged the workload: “I’m not going to lie. At times we were all miserable. It wasn’t a ‘fun’ study group, but it was an amazing experience. Sitting around a conference table with 12 other students who were driven, committed, passionate, and bright made me want to do more and do better.” Today McKallagat is a lawyer in the Office of General Counsel for the Department of the Navy. “I would not be a lawyer if I had not gone on the study group,” she wrote.

Witness to history
For more than seven decades, students on the Washington Study Group have taken a front-row seat for historical events that ranged from the declaration of war to the inauguration, resignation, and impeachment of presidents.

“I was an eyewitness to history,” wrote Jim Milmoe ’69 of his experience on the study group led by Professor David Stern in 1968, a year that would see the Poor People’s March on Washington, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy’s presidential candidacy and assassination, and a country divided over the war in Vietnam. “My New Frontier optimism was about to end, and an education in the realities of politics was about to begin,” wrote Milmoe. “I went back to Colgate that fall with a lifetime of experiences and a conviction that a life in politics was not for me.”

Robert McCallum ’43 was on the Washington Study Group in December 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. “I was standing within 25 yards of the West Wing when I heard from a bystander’s portable radio that the bombing was in progress,” he wrote in his class’s World War II Memoirs. A short while later, classmates Noel Rubinton, Bill Barber, and Ed Jones were at the steps of the State Department when Japanese Ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura and Special Envoy Saburo Kurusu arrived for a fateful meeting with Secretary of State Cordell Hull — Barber and Jones appeared in the background of Life magazine’s photo of Nomura and Kurusu from that day. The following day, Bob Beitz ’43 was in the visitors’ gallery to hear President Franklin Roosevelt deliver his famous “A Day Which Will Live in Infamy” speech to Congress, seeking a declaration of war.

A year later, in December 1942, the Class of ’43 would graduate six months early so the men could join the armed services. The Washington Study Group was suspended during the war years, resum-

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For some, the group had the opposite effect: “I think most of us went to Washington in hopes of getting started in a career in politics,” wrote Bruce Clark ’62. “As far as I know, being on the study group cured us all of that ambition.”

1950s
1960s

For more...
A 1947 press release reported that 55 of the 80 students who had participated in the eight pre-war study groups had gone off to war.

Less than 30 years later, the United States was at war again, this time in Vietnam, and the mood in the nation was decidedly different. Mark Nozette ’71 was in Washington in spring 1970 on the study group led by Professor Edgar Shor. As the war escalated with the invasion of Cambodia, campuses across the country were in turmoil. After six students died in clashes with police and the National Guard during war protests at Kent State and Jackson State, an ad hoc committee of the House of Representatives convened to hear student views on the policy in Southeast Asia. Nozette, who was the newly elected vice president of the student body, testified. “Many of my peers do not wish to see lives taken — be they Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, or their very own — for what they consider to be a worthless cause,” Nozette told the committee during his extended remarks.

As an intern, Nozette often represented Congressman Ben Rosenthal when students came to the office. “I don’t think you could say where the job stopped and the academic work began. It all became part of one,” recalled Nozette, whose study group experience influenced his decision to study law.

Don Foley ’38 saw Franklin Roosevelt’s second inauguration (“We stood on a roof of the Capitol in a drizzle looking down at the ceremony”). Jim Adams ’70 witnessed Richard Nixon’s first inauguration (“probably 20,000 people, 10 percent of the Obama crowd”). Peter Coniglio ’74 had standing room for Nixon’s second inauguration (“every morning brought a new headline in the Washington Post about the Watergate scandal”). Peter Coniglio ’74 had standing room for Nixon’s second inauguration (“every morning brought a new headline in the Washington Post about the Watergate scandal”). Margie Palladino ’82 recalled Ronald Reagan’s inauguration (“and his attempted assassination, and the release of the American hostages in Iran after 444 days”). Through a contact with future Clinton press secretary Mike McCurry, Prof. Levine secured tickets for the ’93 group to attend President Clinton’s MTV inauguration ball (“the toughest ticket in the city,” said Brian Lewis ’94). And Byrnes said he organized his 2009 study group to attend Barack Obama’s inauguration together as their first event of the year (“the biggest crowd I’ve been in in my life, and a wonderful way to be introduced to Washington for the semester”). Anne MacDonald ’00 attended the Clinton impeachment hearing. “An interesting time to be an ‘intern,’” she wrote. Frank Godson ’48 was in the gallery when President Truman addressed a special session of Congress. “Since we were the only group of its kind in Washington at the time, we had access to most of the leaders of Congress, one cabinet member, and one Supreme Court justice.”

Larry Kenna ’68 saw smoke billowing over downtown Washington as he hitchhiked down Connecticut Avenue with classmates Tom Blatner ’69 and Ray Elliott ’69. “A black man pulled over and told us to get in,” Kenna recalled. “He told us that Dr. Martin Luther King had been shot and that the smoke we saw was the result of rioting and the burning of businesses in the predominantly black section of the

“A 21-year-old could not have asked for more,” wrote Chris Fager ’70. “Today, I’m still on a trajectory inspired by that semester.” Now a TV executive in Los Angeles, Fager worked in Washington as a public interest lawyer with the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press following law school.

Attorney Susan Eckert ’85 met Senators Lloyd Bentsen and Ted Kennedy while interning for study group alumna Laurie Sedlmayr ’78 in Arizona Senator Dennis DeConcini’s office, and volunteered for Gary Hart’s presidential campaign: “The 1984 group provided an essential foundation for my career representing labor unions and employees and shaped my interest in politics and public service.”
Finding John Dean

In the spring of 1971, our group had an interview in the Executive Office Building with the Nixon Administration's official in charge of Indian affairs. I don't remember much about him, but I do remember that after the interview, Jim Capalino ’72 and I went off on our own in search of another administration official whom we had heard attended Colgate, at least for two years. He had a job we didn’t know much about: counselor to the president. His name was John Dean. Watergate was still just a fancy apartment complex near the Potomac.

Security was different back then. No one bothered us — two college kids wandering the halls of the Executive Office Building. We found Dean’s office, told his secretary we were from Colgate, and asked if he was free to talk to us. He was. I think he talked about his job and his two years in Hamilton. What I remember most was that in the midst of our impromptu interview, Dean got a phone call, whispered something, then asked if he could have a moment alone. After a few minutes, we were invited back into his office. Dean didn’t explain the mysterious call. It was more than a year before the break-in at Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate, and before Dean warned Nixon about the “cancer on the presidency,” but I’d like to imagine that was the phone call that started it all.

— Bob Minzesheimer ’72
(who became a political reporter and later a book critic with USA Today)
surface in alumni recollections of those interviews, no one is mentioned more than Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who first met with the group in 1988 and has been back almost every year since.

"Justice Scalia does it with such great humor," said Brubaker. "There may be a moment where students are intimidated — he's such a presence and he's also pugnacious — but then they realize his playful manner and become engaged. He comes back because our students are prepared. They're ready with the argument and he's willing to take them on."

Students also frequently interview Colgate alumni, some of whom are study group alumni themselves. Peter Ackerman '68 and Jack DuVall '68 were friends at Colgate and on the 1967 study group. Thirty years later, they co-wrote the book *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* and collaborated on a related PBS documentary, which has subsequently been viewed in more than 80 countries. Today they head the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, where Ackerman is the founding chair and DuVall is the president and founding director. They met with study groups in 2008 and 2009.

When Peter Conigliò '74 talks to the group about the ethical obligations of executive branch employees, he speaks from the perspective of someone with experience in the Department of Justice, the Treasury Department, and the General Services Administration, but also with a memory of Washington in 1973, when the Watergate scandal was in full bloom. Of that spring, he remembered, "it appeared the wheels were coming off our government, and perhaps the country."

Senate Parliamentarian Alan Frumin '68 played a central role in this year's health care decision. "He is unparalleled in what he tells students about the history of the Senate," said Prof. Byrnes, "and he gives the greatest tour of the Capitol imaginable."

The names and events change across the years, but the quality of the experience remains constant.

As both a constitutional scholar with an appreciation for the enduring legacy of James Madison — and a study group director building on the lessons and performances of people like Ed Shor, David Stern, and, above all, Paul Jacobsen — a reflective Stanley Brubaker said, "I am struck by how fortunate we are to live in the heritage that they've given us."

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"My experiences in DC helped to sharpen my focus and determine that I was most interested in the legislative branch and wanted to be with those helping to make policy decisions," wrote Alli O’Leary ’08, who works today as a legislative aide in the Massachusetts State House.