

“Suppose you were an idiot . . .”

Tales from Capitol Hill

Of the federal government's three coequal branches – Legislative, Executive and Judicial -- it is undoubtedly the first – the Congress – which has been the easiest target for the japes, ripostes and barbs of satirists from Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce to Will Rogers and Jon Stewart. Consider the following sampler:

- *“Reader, suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.”* (Mark Twain)
- *“The Senate is a body of old men charged with high duties and misdemeanors”* (Ambrose Bierce)
- *“With Congress, every time they make a joke it's a law, and every time they make a law it's a joke.”* (Will Rogers)
- *“There are two enemies to every bill proposed in Congress: the fools who favor it and the lunatics who oppose it.”* (Anonymous)

Despite these quips and cracks [which *do* carry a simulacrum of truth], Congress is an institution that has [and always will be, one suspects] populated with some of the country's most interesting and extraordinary people. This course will explore the lives and accomplishments of six members of the United States Congress who, Twain's bromide to the contrary, were definitely *not* idiots. In the process, we will lift up a bit of the veil that traditionally hides Congress and take a peek inside.

Lectures (Six):

1. **Jefferson Monroe Levy (1852-1924):** Levy not only created the Federal Reserve Bank; he purchased, restored and donated Jefferson's estate Monticello to the American people.
2. **Fiorello LaGuardia (1882-1947):** As good a big-city Mayor as the “Little Flower” was, he was an even better member of Congress.
3. **Simon Guggenheim (1867-1941):** A senator from Colorado who was wealthy enough to outbid Brazil for a mansion on Embassy Row.
4. **Barry Goldwater (1909-1998):** If American politics have moved to the right over the past 40 years, Goldwater's one of the major reasons.
5. **Ernest Gruening (1887-1974):** A true Renaissance Man, Gruening was a Harvard-trained physician, a journalist and the “father” of our 49th and 50th states.
6. **Judah P. Benjamin (1811-1884):** After serving as Senator from Louisiana and Secretary of State of the Confederacy, Benjamin became Counsel to Queen Victoria.