

Tina Tate

Opening Day Traditions of a New Congress

Institutional role of the House Radio-TV Gallery in broadcasting the Opening Day of a new Congress.
Interview recorded December 4, 2009

Well, as you know, Congress—the House—is not a continuing body; it reconvenes and sets its new rules every two years. And at the Opening Day ceremonies, it's a very festive day. Members are excited, new Members are here with their families, and there were certain procedural things that we had always been able to cover. That was one of the two times we could bring cameras into the chamber: we were allowed to bring them in for Opening Day and for State of the Union. And there were.... This was before, even before you had 1979, when the chamber was broadcast gavel-to-gavel. We were allowed to bring cameras in for those days even before '79. So, there was a certain protocol of what was allowed to happen. That's standard and that's always a happy day and always a very creative day for stories about the new Members. But when you have a change of Congress, that's when our office really does one of its better days of service because the new Members include a new leadership. And the new leadership and a new Speaker, when it [the House] changes parties we can provide a continuum of what has happened in the past. Now, each Speaker can decide not to go with the precedents that had been set, but they don't always realize what the precedents were, or why. Our office because it has good records of that sort of thing—it's not the sort of thing that other offices would really keep tabs on. But when you had the cameras up, when you had the lights down, all sorts of things that affect how the day looks and how the day is perceived, that is one of the things that we were able to do with both changes of the House. When the House went to the Republican Party as the majority, and when the House went back to the Democratic Party as the majority. And I think if you ask either Speaker's Office, they would say that it was, it was very helpful to them to have someone in Office who had that institutional memory and could guide them, and then they could make their choices about what changes they wanted to make.