The Honorable Nancy Lee Johnson  

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“Freshmen Are to Be Seen but Not Heard”  
Representative Johnson describes speaking on the House Floor.  
*Interview recorded December 3, 2015*

I'll tell you one funny little story that happened my freshman year. Stewart McKinney was on the floor, from Connecticut, and, managing a bill, a HUD bill. And he had been here a long time, and he was an expert on HUD, and a highly-regarded Ranking Member. He wasn't the chairman, but the committee, the parties worked very closely together and the Ranking Member had a real say. So he's managing it and I come to the floor. And he said, “Well, what are you here for?” I said, “I'm going to speak on this amendment.” “Oh.” He said, “Well, I can give you two minutes. You know, that's all you kind of get around here.” I said, “Okay.” This was about pets in public housing. And we had had this issue in the senate. I knew just where my people stood on it and it's an important issue. So, I said my piece. He said, “And now remember, you know, you can't go over the two minutes.” I said, “It's all right.” So, I did my time. I said what I had to say. And he said, “Really, a good job. But remember, on the whole, freshmen are to be seen, but not heard.” And that's not a bad idea because I felt it wasn't until about my fourth term when I really understood at a fairly profound level what it is to govern a nation as diverse as ours.