

PHYSICS “FILIBUSTER FOR DEMOCRACY”

an Editorial by Cathy Kunkel, Princeton University, with an Introduction by Dr. Gary White, SPS/Sigma Pi Sigma Director

INTRODUCTION

My wife, Susan, had pointed out to me the article about Cathy Kunkel in the newspaper two days earlier. She is a Princeton University physics major who, according to the Washington Post, was instrumental in starting a campaign to defend the right to filibuster in front of the building named after Senate Majority Leader Frist's family. The initial idea was to defend minority rights and the idea of a filibuster, by speaking continuously for a day or two, but it expanded—a lot. Noted physicists Witten and Wilczek from Princeton University joined others in the marathon. The protesters and their supporters, careful to include Republicans and Democrats, and insisting that it was a non-partisan issue, continued for 384 hours. The event concluded with the Princeton students traveling to Capitol Hill for a grand finale. Rush Holt, a member of the House of Representatives and a physicist, joined them, along with others from Congress, for the final hour of the mock filibuster in front of the Capitol Building.

I met Cathy there on a drizzly Thursday, May 12, 2005, while another student was reading into the microphone from the Princeton catalog as part of the filibustering effort. Cathy was engaging and compelling and a little bit worried about her E&M final coming up the next day. It was the first political rally I had been to since I moved to the Washington, DC, area and it was...empowering, maybe?...certainly, intriguing and informative. Anyway, following is her take on the entire event...

For more information about the mock filibuster, please visit these two links:

<http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/05/10/princeton.filibuster/>
<http://filibuster.unending.org/filibuster-press-release-rally.html>

— by Gary White, SPS/Sigma Pi Sigma Director

EDITORIAL

Political activist and physics major do not often go together. That is why I was mildly surprised to find myself, two days before my physics final, traveling on a bus to Washington, DC, for a political protest. We were going to set up a mock filibuster for more than 24 hours in front of the Capitol, in order to protest the “Nuclear Option” proposed by Senate Republican leaders to eliminate the use of the filibuster in blocking judicial nominations. This was the culmination of a mock filibuster that had started more than two weeks earlier in front of the Frist Campus Center at Princeton University. Students, faculty, and community members read continuously, 24 hours a day, for 384 hours to show their support for the rights of the minority party; we were covered by the New York Times, CNN, C-SPAN, MSNBC, and more.

The event had been organized by a group of concerned students who got together solely for this issue, many of us having never met before. It was truly a grassroots action, unaffiliated with any particular organization. We came from a diverse array of academic backgrounds (biology, classics, physics, anthropology, etc), as well as representing a wide spectrum of political views. The initial goal was to filibuster for 12 hours, but students and community members were so eager to filibuster that the event took on a life of its own. Students read from works ranging from “The Federalist Papers” to the first 3,000 digits of pi to the proof of Godel’s Incompleteness Theorem.

At Princeton, the first support that the filibuster received from faculty was from the physics department: Ed Witten and his wife, physics professor Chiara Nappi, read from Griffith’s, “Introduction to Elementary Particles.” Two other physics professors spoke later in the week, and another professor strongly encouraged me to spend the last two days before his electro-dynamics exam filibustering in Washington, DC. For me, that was one of the most amazing things about this protest—to see people who I would not have expected getting involved in this. It was an important reminder to me that, no matter what our professional role, we also have a responsibility to pay attention to what is going on in our country. I was excited to see students and faculty stepping outside of their academic roles and embracing their duty as citizens.



CATHY KUNKEL

Cathy Kunkel is a physics major at Princeton University who met Dr. Gary White at the “Filibuster for Democracy” rally in Washington, DC. He suggested that she write an editorial and she complied.