

[The Arizona Republic](#)

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The newly sworn-in representative from Arizona's 5th Congressional District had some important business to attend to at the nation's Capitol before he could get back to me.

"He's down in the gift shop trying to find something for his grandkids," said Rep. Harry Mitchell's press secretary, Seth Scott.

The real work is about to begin for Mitchell and the rest of the newly elected Congress. There have been weeks of initiation followed by days of ceremonies.

"I got each of the kids one of those stress balls in the shape of the Capitol dome," Mitchell told me when he called back. "They recognize that. The oldest is 8 and the youngest 3. I have to say that I guess I'm a little softer than I thought I was. I get choked up thinking about them. What I'm doing here, it's really for my grandkids."

At 66, Mitchell is the oldest "freshman" in the House of Representatives.

He has had a long and successful career as a teacher. He served on the Tempe City Council, then as mayor, then as a member of the Arizona Senate.

He hadn't planned to run from Congress but decided that former Rep. J.D. Hayworth didn't really represent the values of the community where Mitchell grew up. And he won.

Now, in a way that must be shocking to his colleagues but is shockingly refreshing to the rest of us, Mitchell's political accomplishments have exceeded his dreams.

"I'm not running for speaker of the House," he said. "I'm not planning to run for the U.S. Senate or for governor. I only hope to perform a valuable service for the people who sent me. On City Council and as mayor, we could always point to the state and say that there were things we couldn't do. In the state Senate, we could point to the federal government. Now, I'm here and there is no one else to turn to, and you realize just how many people depend on you."

The transition isn't easy. Mitchell and his wife, Marianne, live in a rented apartment in Rosslyn, Va., across the river from Washington. He walks to the local metro terminal and rides the train to a stop near his Capitol office.

"It's very different for us," he said. "We're on the third floor of this high-rise. You can't step outside to see how cold it is. It seems odd. We've lived in the same house for 40 years."

On the other hand, the House of Representatives is not unlike high school, where Mitchell

taught government for 28 years.

"There are all these different caucuses," he said, "Like cliques. And here I am standing with people that you read about in the papers or see on TV. Yesterday reminded me of my teaching days. It was like the first day of school when everybody is full of optimism and hope."

He expects that to change this week as Congress begins the real work of the new session. Mitchell has been assigned to the Transportation Committee, which he said should work to the state's advantage. He has concerns about the Iraq war, health care, immigration, education and many other issues. What he does not have is the need or the desire to broker his principles to promote his career.

When he speaks of preserving his reputation "in town," he's not talking about Washington, D.C., but Tempe. That doesn't mean his choices will be correct, but we can expect most to be honestly made. That alone might be reason to consider raising the minimum age for those wishing to serve in Congress to, say, 65.

"This was the right time for me to have gotten into this," Mitchell said. "I know what's important. My kids live in Tempe. My grandkids. I would never do anything to screw that up."