

Pomp, Circumstance and Arms

The post of sergeant-at-arms has a rich tradition and a vital modern role.



Wisconsin Senate Sergeant-at-Arms Ted Blazel was in charge of maintaining normal legislative operations during the protests of 2011.

BY MORGAN CULLEN

Every year for the past 230, the South Carolina Senate has convened session in the same manner. Lawmakers file down the center aisle, stand in front of their seats and wait for the lieutenant governor to be escorted into the chamber by the sergeant-at-arms.

For 30 years, Senate Sergeant-at-Arms Jim Melton has worn the same customary black suit and white gloves as his predecessors and led the presiding officer to his desk bearing the ceremonial state sword in his hands. The sword is placed in a cradle on the Senate rostrum and lamps on either side are turned on. The lieutenant governor calls the Senate to order and an opening devotion is led by the chaplain, followed by the senators reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Morgan Cullen staffs the NCSL organization for sergeants-at-arms.

A Storied History

Each legislature has developed special customs over the years, yet the traditional responsibilities of the sergeant-at-arms remain, and can be traced back more than 700 years to England's King Edward I. He was the first, in 1279, to employ 20 sergeants as personal body guards. Previously, they had guarded only the garrisons of royal castles, or escorted traitors or other prisoners to the Tower of London. Over the two centuries, as the number of the king's body guards grew, so did their reputation for brutality and abuse of power.

In 1415, after Parliament issued a formal request, King Henry V appointed Nicholas Maudit, one of his royal sergeants, to be the first House of Commons sergeant-at-arms. Today, they are employed within the parliaments of eight countries, the U.S. Congress and 49 U.S. legislatures. More than half a millennium later, a sense of the position's medieval origins persists, particularly in its ceremonial role in parliamentary proceedings.

Dennis Clark has served as sergeant-at-arms for the Legis-



Sergeants Play Different Roles

The sergeant-at-arms in South Carolina has always held a principal role in the legislature. Chief responsibilities of the position include assisting the presiding officer, providing security, maintaining decorum and performing ceremonial duties.

In 48 other states, the sergeants-at-arms have similar responsibilities and ceremonial duties. Rhode Island is the only state that does not employ a sergeant-at-arms in its legislature, but it has a constitutional provision requiring a sheriff in both chambers, whose position is similar to a sergeant-at-arms.

In 17 legislative chambers, the sergeant escorts the presiding officer on the first day of the session, and in five of them, he continues to do so every day of the session. In Kansas, the Senate sergeant-at-arms swears in pages, and in the Massachusetts General Court and the North Carolina House, the job includes escorting the governor to the chamber for the swearing-in ceremony.

For 30 years, South Carolina Senate Sergeant-at-Arms Jim Melton has convened session wearing the customary black suit and white gloves and bearing the ceremonial state sword.

lative Assembly in Ontario, Canada, for the past 15 years. His main ceremonial duty is to serve as custodian of the mace, the official ornamental staff. In fulfilling his responsibilities, Clark wears the traditional uniform, complete with an admiral's hat, frock coat with long tails, formal black pants and shoes, and the ceremonial sword. He also has a designated seat in the chamber.

Clark fully understands, however, that his position has evolved into a more serious role in the modern legislature. He is also responsible for maintaining order and security in the chamber in this age of increasingly sophisticated threats.

"I am tasked with overseeing two of the largest branches in the Assembly," Clark says. "I am the director of security and also the facilities manager, so I am responsible for making sure our building and security systems meet the needs of a 21st century assembly."

For many sergeants-at-arms, overseeing security for both the chamber and the capitol building is a key responsibility. For the past

32 years, Tony Beard has served the California Senate as chief sergeant-at-arms and has witnessed changes in the responsibilities of the position.

"When I first started, our security operations were pretty limited. Today we maintain magnetometers and X-ray machines at our entrances, and security cameras and other monitoring equipment throughout the Capitol building.

"Our security needs must evolve to meet the challenges of the world we live in," Beard says.

"Cyber security, IEDs and the advent of social media are just some of the new challenges we face when assessing the security requirements of the capitol building."

Balancing Security and Rights

Sergeants-at-arms are also responsible for ensuring the day-to-day operations of the legislature run smoothly. Maintaining



*Senate Sergeant-at-Arms
Tony Beard
California*



Dennis Clark, sergeant-at-arms for the Legislative Assembly in Ontario, Canada, serves as the official custodian of the mace.

order and providing a safe legislative environment while protecting the democratic process and the First Amendment rights of the public is a challenge sergeants face daily. It can be particularly difficult in a contentious political environment that attracts large protests onto the capitol grounds.

Thousands of protestors descended on the Wisconsin Capitol in 2011 to protest legislation changing the state's collective bargaining agreement. While 100,000 protestors filled the halls and rotunda of the Capitol for six weeks, Wisconsin Senate Sergeant-at-Arms Ted Blazel was expected to guarantee normal legislative operations.

"We had never dealt with these kinds of numbers before," Blazel says. "I was in regular contact with structural engineers and the fire department to make sure the Capitol could safely handle so many people. It was also very important that effec-

Ceremonial Symbols

For centuries, legislative bodies have used a mace, sword or flag as a symbol of authority, strength, knowledge and independence.

- ◆ A ceremonial mace is also used in the U.S. House of Representatives, the South Carolina House, the Virginia House, both chambers in Arkansas, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, and the Maryland House of Delegates.
- ◆ The South Carolina Senate is the only chamber where the sergeant-at-arms carries a sword during legislative proceedings.
- ◆ A few countries with ties to Great Britain—Ireland, Australia, the Bahamas, Canada and Sri Lanka—acquired maces during the 18th century that are still used in parliamentary proceedings today.
- ◆ The Philippines also uses a mace in its proceedings.



Portrait of British House of Commons Sergeant-At-Arms Nicholas Bonfoy with his son and deputy, by 18th century English painter John Hamilton Mortimer.

tive communication was maintained between Capitol police, my counterpart in the House and myself to maintain effective security throughout the building."

The pomp and circumstance of the role of sergeant-at-arms may often define the job for many legislative observers, but the serious responsibilities of the position are indispensable. Unless there is an incident, ensuring security and maintaining normal operations of the legislature often go unnoticed.

And that's just what sergeants-at-arms want. Making sure nothing happens is their measure of success. For them, a boring day is a very good day indeed.



*Senate Sergeant-at-Arms
Ted Blazel
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