

MARTHA SCOTT POINDEXTER:

Short Washington Stay Turns into Career for MSU Alum

By Bob Ratliff



Courtesy Photo

“Martha Scott is one of the brightest, most talented people on Capitol Hill.”

SENATOR CHAMBLISS

Whether on a Delta basketball court or in the halls of the nation’s Capitol, determination to do the best possible job motivates Martha Scott Poindexter.

The oldest of Fred and Dotty Poindexter’s four daughters, Martha Scott grew up on the family’s cotton, rice and soybean farm near Morgan City. She approached schoolwork and sports with the same enthusiasm and determination.

“Once she makes up her mind she can do anything she wants,” said her mother.

After earning a degree in home economics with an emphasis in food and nutrition at Mississippi State University, Martha Scott wanted to go to Washington, D.C., “for a little while.” That was 16 years ago.

“I graduated in December of 1989 and came straight to D.C. to work for Sen. Thad Cochran,” she said. “I was an aide to Mark Keenum, who was Sen. Cochran’s legislative assistant for agriculture.”

Today, Martha Scott is majority staff director for the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture. It’s a job she trained for from the time of her arrival at the Capitol.

“We were working on the 1990 Farm Bill, which was a full year of wheeling and dealing and all-night meetings,” she said. “It was a really busy time, and I thought it was that way all the time.”

Coming from rural Mississippi into that type of atmosphere would have been daunting for some, but Martha Scott found she had a natural love for the political process.

“I was like a kid in a candy shop. We were always meeting with someone about agriculture and all the different interests that were fighting for money for their programs,” she said. “Some small programs, like honey bees and sheep, were being phased out at that time, but it was not an overhaul of all the farm programs. It was intense, but it wasn’t like it was in ‘96, when the different commodities were fighting each other. It was intense, but interesting, and a good time for agriculture.”

It also was an opportunity to learn how legislation is crafted.

“There was a team of five of us led by Mark Keenum,” she said. “I had not been involved in politics at all and learned a lot from Mark, including how to network.”

Once she got to know the people involved, she found that working on Capitol Hill has similarities to working in a small town.

“I would compare it to anywhere else; you get to know people who you can pick up the phone and call and learn from,” she said. “If you have an understanding and

knowledge of the basics, then you throw in politics, and that's what you have to work with."

Her work on the 1990 Farm Bill led to a promotion to legislative assistant for interior, environment and interior appropriations with Sen. Cochran.

"Working on appropriations allowed me to look at programs from a fiduciary side as well as learning how the programs work, which deals with authorizing language, so you learn all sides of legislation," she said. "That's especially true for agriculture."

After 3 years in Sen. Cochran's office, Martha Scott returned to school, this time to the University of Maryland, where she did an internship in nutrition. Following the internship, she was a registered dietitian, but the determination to serve agriculture led to work with a lobbyist for Louisiana sugar cane farmers and then to the office of the junior Republican congressman from Georgia, Saxby Chambliss.

From 1995 to 1997, she was a senior legislative assistant for agriculture and natural resources for Congressman Chambliss.

"I was working for Congressman Chambliss during the 1996 Farm Bill debate. Georgia's main interest at the time was the peanut program," she said. "The Republicans were trying to cut back costs in farm programs and everywhere else to control the deficit. The peanut program was completely overhauled, and some of the changes were hard for farmers to accept."

She did, however, help negotiate a Peanut Title of the 1996 Farm Bill that was accepted by farmers, industry and the public.

After 2 years in the congressman's office, Martha Scott returned to work for Sen. Cochran, spending 5 years working with agricultural appropriations. She then gained additional experience as director of government affairs for Monsanto Corp., working on a variety of biotechnology issues, including conservation, soybeans, sugar beets, wheat and cotton before returning to Capitol Hill as legislative director for then Sen. Chambliss in 2002.

She assumed her current duties as majority staff director of the Senate Committee on Agriculture in 2005, following Sen. Chambliss' appointment as chairman of the committee.

It's a job that is both difficult and rewarding.

"I feel like the conductor of a train," she said. "I have to keep everything moving on time and look into the future and plan how to get there. It's one of the hardest jobs I've had, but also the best."

The 2006 Farm Bill is the next big piece of legislation the committee will deal with.

"The 2006 Farm Bill is on everyone's mind, and it will be driven by two things—budget and trade," she said. "Past farm bills have been driven by budget but never so much by trade issues as this one will be."

Food issues, including its availability, are things most Americans take for granted, but keeping the nation's food supply plentiful and affordable are concerns when dealing with farm legislation.

"As with energy, people have gotten used to cheap food," Martha Scott said. "If what has happened with energy prices should happen with food, it will cause the same type of

reaction but probably even stronger."

Just like past farm bills, the 2006 legislation will require long hours, political expertise and an understanding of agriculture, but Sen. Chambliss said the committee's staff director is ready for the challenge.

"Martha Scott is one of the brightest, most talented people on Capitol Hill," he said. "She is extremely well respected by senators and staffers

alike for her expertise and her ability to get things done. She does a great job of leading the Ag Committee staff, and it also pleases me that she is from the SEC!"

She has a similar opinion of the two senators she has worked for.

"Sen. Cochran is one of the most respected members of Congress. That's important because compromise is what makes Washington work, and Thad Cochran is one of the best at making it work," she said. "Sen. Chambliss has the same qualities."

The opportunity to work with individuals of that caliber and for agriculture is what keeps her from returning to Mississippi for more than short visits with family in the Delta.

"I only came up here with plans to stay for 6 months, and it has been 16 years," she said. "I don't think I'll move out of town anytime soon."



Above, Martha Scott Poindexter visits with MSU President Charles Lee in her Capitol Hill office. Opposite page, Poindexter and Sen. Saxby Chambliss on the way to a meeting during a congressional visit to Russia.

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