

Your Congressman: A Six-Million-Dollar Man

By David Mason

It has been particularly enjoyable to be outside of Washington this week, in part because of the reactions I get when I explain that I write about the Congress for a living. The usual response is sympathy, as if I had a necessary but somewhat distasteful job—and there is that aspect to dealing with Congress. But for the most part, I genuinely enjoy my job, for it is certainly a good time to be a congressional reformer.

There is a publication in Washington called *Roll Call*, which styles itself “the newspaper of Capitol Hill.” On the day I left Washington a banner headline across the top of the front page told us that a House committee had been forced to temporarily furlough some of its staff, and that other committees faced a similar threat because the House had not passed its annual committee funding bill.¹ The rest of the front page was taken up by stories about the House Bank scandal, the House Post Office investigation, and the possibility that a lot of incumbent Congressmen would be defeated at the polls this fall. To my mind, this is all good news. Of course, I’m not happy to see someone laid off, even temporarily, but I think it is a useful lesson for Congress during this nationwide recession: If you don’t get your work done on time, and if you don’t satisfy your customers (the voters in this case), there are real, and often unpleasant, consequences. If Congress is about to be dragged back into reality by outraged voters, so much the better.

My immediate task is to explore the culture of the Imperial Congress by examining the budget of the royal household. Just how big is the congressional budget? Just how many perks do our elected representatives lavish upon themselves? We started looking into this a couple of years ago and came to the initial conclusion that the congressional budget is bigger than a bread box—a lot bigger. Just how much bigger is difficult to determine—information about the congressional budget is hard to find. For executive agencies, getting the budget is fairly easy—just look at the Appropriations bills passed by Congress. If you want more detail, there are scores of legally required and publicly available budget documents.

Arcane and Confusing. Getting information about Congress, on the other hand, is exceedingly difficult. In the first place, the Legislative Appropriations bill that funds most, but by no means all, of Congress’s expenses is arcane and deliberately confusing. To find out how much one committee spends, you have to examine five different accounts. A long-time member of the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee recently had this system explained to him for the first time—by a reporter. His reaction: “That’s fascinating. I didn’t know that. You know, you turn up a rock and you’re likely to find a lizard.”²

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1 *Roll Call*, April 9, 1992.

2 *Congressional Quarterly* Special Report, “Where the Money Goes,” December 7, 1992, p. 111.

Even if you finally penetrate the Appropriations bill, you'll discover that many expenses aren't included. Search all you will, but you will find no funds for Congressmen's salaries. But don't assume they're not being paid or are going broke. Their \$129,500 annual stipends, now with automatic cost-of-living adjustments, are provided through what is known as a "permanent appropriation"—otherwise known as an entitlement. I guess this makes Congressmen America's richest welfare recipients.

Other items which aren't funded in the annual budget include: foreign travel (those infamous congressional junkets), part of their retirement benefits, free medical care, and the many executive branch employees who are "detailed"—that is, they are loaned to Congress, sometimes for years at a stretch. These costs aren't insubstantial: the average congressional retiree stands to collect around \$2 million in pension payments.

Exempt From Audits. I may still be missing a few items, because Congress—or as it often refers to itself, "The People's Body"—has exempted itself from the Freedom of Information Act, as well as from most other laws it passes. Try to get something from Congress and they can just say no. There is, for instance, something called the Capitol Preservation Commission, which was funded by a special sale of commemorative coins rather than by a regular appropriation. That Commission now has \$16 million in the bank, but has done nothing in four years of operations. There is no source of public information on the Commission's operations, and despite laws calling for it, there has never been an audit of the Commission's funding.³ In another case, House Speaker Tom Foley decided to have some elevators in the Capitol redecorated, including new marble flooring, at a cost of several million dollars. But there was no opportunity for other Congressmen, much less the taxpayers who provided the lavish new convenience, to comment on whether the expense was appropriate. And, by the way, if you visit Washington and go to the Capitol you won't be able to ride on these expensive elevators—they're for Congressmen only!

What is the bottom line on the congressional budget? Adding all of these benefits together you find that the average, run-of-the-mill Congressman is, like the TV show of a few years ago—a six-million-dollar man. Appropriated spending for Congress this year will amount to just under \$3 billion—an average of over \$5 million for each Senator and Representative. Add in pay, retirement, travel, medical care, parking, detailed employees, free publications, historic preservation, marble floors and suddenly every Congressman is a TV star.

Now, some people inside the Beltway say, "Gee, what's wrong with that? After all, these people have important jobs. It's just a drop in the bucket compared to the Executive Branch. Corporate CEOs make a lot more," and on and on. I could argue with all the analogies, but the real problem is a lot simpler. With all of the perks, privileges and power, the average Congressman begins to think he *is* the six-million-dollar man: He can see farther, run faster, jump higher and is just plain smarter than the average 'ol constituent. Pretty soon the Congressman starts to feel that the folks back home just don't understand. Then, a little later the Congressman starts thinking that he really *deserves* all of the perks, and you end up, for instance, with the Defense Department providing congressional airplanes that make first class travel on a commercial airline look like the back of the bus.

The budget isn't all. There's the deferential staff, favor-seeking lobbyists, free meals and vacations, fawning bureaucrats, and interest groups offering adulation. According to the Florida-based newsletter *Lobbying & Influence Alert*, there are 77 lobbyists for each U.S. Senator and about 24 lobbyists for each House member. It all ends in an attitude that breeds scandal:

3 *Roll Call*, April 8, 1992, p. 3.

bounced checks at the House Bank, money laundering at the House Post Office, ghost employees, using tax money for campaigns, trading influence for contributions, and then trying to cover it all up. Still, the ultimate evil isn't the perks themselves, but the transformation of our democratically elected representatives into imperial satraps.

Bloated Staff. Congress—and our representative democracy—was hurt by this process long before the scandals broke out. The congressional staffs I mentioned are three times as large today as they were in 1960, and, as Vice President Quayle has pointed out, this allows the Congressman to do a lot more—to serve, for example, on seventeen committees and subcommittees. An obvious question, however, is whether America as a whole, or even Congress in particular, has benefitted from the rapid growth and gargantuan size of the legislature. In fact, Congress suffers directly as a result of this overload—mostly by becoming more bureaucratic. Congressional staffs spend most of their time trying to manipulate bureaucracies. The Pentagon alone receives 2,500 phone calls every working day from Capitol Hill—that is nearly five each day from every Member of Congress. And Congressmen write over 100,000 letters a year to the Defense Department—that is almost a letter a day from every Congressman. Now none of this prevented the \$300 hammer or the \$500 toilet seat because, believe me, those calls and letters aren't mostly to check up on whether the Pentagon is spending money wisely, but to make sure they spend it in the right place.

But again, what's so bad about pork—it is certainly amusing for Heritage to write about leafy spurge bio-control or the Sweet Auburn Curb Market. But at only \$100,000 each, these don't add up very fast—at least not by congressional standards. One illustration may suffice. In 1956 Congress passed the Interstate Highway Act, which in the memory of most of you revolutionized transportation in America. In that bill, Congress made a few big decisions—that we would have a new, national highway network, built to then unheard-of standards, and they passed a federal gasoline tax to pay for it. Then they stopped. They left it up to the Transportation Departments of six successive administrations and fifty states to decide exactly where to put the roads and which to build first. It was a remarkable success. Last year, in contrast, Congress passed another transportation bill that dwarfed the 1956 act in terms of spending, but most of the funds were earmarked by individual Congressmen for individual districts, even down to the level of dictating the timing of a specific traffic light in a small Pennsylvania town. What was lost in the rush to bring home the bacon was any conception of the national interest, or any significant thought about future transportation needs: should we reform the air travel system, encourage high speed rail, look at private road construction? These questions were addressed only insofar as they represented the subject of a research grant for a local university. And when you look back 25 years from now the billions of dollars spent in that bill will have made little noticeable difference. What we lose from a bloated, pork-obsessed Congress isn't as much the wasted money as the lost opportunity to make real decisions about major issues that affect us in significant ways.

Wave of Reform. Everyone realizes there are many problems with Congress—just turn on the late night talk shows and Congress jokes abound. But I believe things can get better. Historically Congress does change. Congressional reform comes in big waves. There was one in 1946, another in 1974, and we are today on the verge of yet another big wave. Those previous waves were preceded by a lot of intellectual groundwork, and Heritage is working to provide that groundwork now, so that when 100 or more freshmen Congressmen show up for work in January of 1993 we'll have a reform program ready.

Everyone agrees that something should be done, but what can we do? First, be suspicious of incumbent congressmen bearing reform plans. Campaign finance reform, for instance, would tax you to pay for politicians' re-election efforts and, in the process, would give incumbents even greater advantages over challengers.

Second, keep up the pressure. Public outrage over cover-ups of the Bank and Post Office scandals have started to rock the cozy incumbent protection machine, and already fifty House Members and half a dozen Senators have decided to call it quits. Don't be disgusted, stay mad.

Third, think big. Some well-intentioned Republicans on Capitol Hill are talking about 25 percent, 33 percent, even 50 percent cuts in committee staff areas (not all, though). But committee staff is only a small part of the overall congressional staff. Even if we cut the *whole* congressional staff in half, it would still be twice as large as it was when Congress passed that interstate highway bill. Keep in mind that, if the objective is not to save a few hundred million dollars in staff salaries, but to change the way the institution operates, you need significant, broad-ranging cuts.

What about the committees? Dan Quayle told us recently how he eliminated a few committees when he was in the Senate, but why not get rid of standing committees altogether? People have proposed rotating committee chairmen or members as a way of breaking up the iron triangle, whereby long-time committee members become not just part of the problem, but *the* problem. But Congress got along for over a hundred years with just a few standing committees—and many legislatures still operate that way today. Originally, a bill was introduced, debated for an hour, and then acted upon. Unobjectionable bills were passed, bad ones died a quick death, and important legislation that might need more consideration was referred to a specially selected committee which had as its only purpose refining that bill and bringing it back to the floor. Restoring a system like that would go a long way toward eliminating the special interest influence and legislative logjams that bedevil Congress.

Making Congress More Representative. Last, we need to de-professionalize Congress. Most of us agree on term limits, but perhaps more damaging than the number of years spent in Washington is the number of days. If Congress is a full-time job, Representatives have to quit their jobs, pull their children out of school, move their families—in short, sever all of their real ties to the communities they represent. While it will require reversing the momentum of twenty years or more of ethics laws, it is worth the effort to make Congress less professional and more representative. We could start by requiring them to spend two months at home every summer instead of only one, with the goal of limiting congressional sessions to six months a year or less.

While these suggestions sound a bit far-fetched today—at least they do in Washington—real reform is possible with continued electoral pressure and perhaps term limits. But, we need to think big, for if this truly is an Imperial Congress, only a real revolution will change it.

