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THE COSTLY CONGRESS BECOMES MORE COSTLY

INTRODUCTION

The American people must “do more with less,” said Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, the Maine Democrat, in his January 29 response to George Bush’s 1991 State of the Union message. “Governments must do the same,” added Mitchell, “to be more careful with your tax dollars.”

These words ring hollow in the face of the Senate spending spree that followed. Congress cannot expect the American people to “do more with less” until Congress itself is willing to do the same. It should start by freezing its committee budgets and staffs at last year’s level. Instead, Congress has been boosting its own operating budgets, even after last year’s hefty pay raise and major tax increase.

Unreasonable Proposals

“Shocking,” is how Senator Jesse Helms, the North Carolina Republican, on January 29 described the increases sought for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee budget by its Chairman Claiborne Pell, the Rhode Island Democrat. The reason for Helms’ dismay: Pell proposed and succeeded in getting the Senate Rules Committee to ignore its rules restricting the growth of committee budgets and staff. Pell obtained an exemption to increase fiscal 1991 spending by 17 percent, or \$345,000 to add eight new staff members to the Foreign Relations Committee’s current staff of 59.

Pell is not alone. Almost unnoticed this year, with the public’s attention focused on the Persian Gulf war, both the House and the Senate approved record increases in operating expenses for their committees. These increases were not included in last fall’s trumpeted budget deal between the Congress and the White House. The Senate on February 21 approved a biennial budget, increasing committee expenditures by almost \$5 million over last year’s budget authority of \$53.4

million. The House, meanwhile, on March 20 increased its annual committee budgets by 10.8 percent to \$55.1 million, plus an additional \$5.7 million for House Information Systems.¹ The only House committees not receiving more money for fiscal 1991 are Ethics and Intelligence.

Breach of Faith. Pell justifies the Foreign Relations Committee's request for more tax dollars by arguing that it is in response to "an expected large increase in the Committee's workload...including three major arms control treaties, five other major treaties, and activity relating to the Persian Gulf crisis."² Senator Conrad Burns, the Montana Republican, denounced this and similar increases sought by other committee chairmen as "a breach of faith with the American people, given last year's budget, to waste even more tax dollars."³

Despite such complaints, Pell and his fellow committee chairmen prevailed. In all, Congress has added roughly \$14 million to congressional committee coffers. These funds will add even more employees to the Legislative Branch's current staff force of 37,388.

In addition to outright increases in committee spending, Congress approved committee hikes that remain hidden from public view. Example: The Senate Foreign Relations Committee was permitted to roll over to fiscal 1991 some \$345,000 in non-recurring funds approved for last year's budget. Thus, although the public record shows that the Committee's budget this year will increase by 2 percent, it will actually increase by 17 percent. "Sleight of hand" is how Helms characterizes such budget deception by the Senate.

Committee Requests

On February 22, the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration presented the "Omnibus Committee Funding Resolution for 1991 and 1992" requesting increases in all nineteen Senate committee budgets for fiscal 1991 and 1992. Twelve of these committees are to receive spending increases, five of them beyond the amounts authorized by normal Senate rules, which only allow cost of living adjustments. In addition to the 17 percent sought by the Foreign Relations Committee, other Senate requests include: Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat and Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, for 14.2 percent more; Donald Riegle, the Michigan Democrat and Chairman of the Banking Committee, for 34 percent more; and Lloyd Bentsen, the Texas Democrat and Chairman of the Finance Committee, for 25.3 percent more. The biggest increase is sought by Daniel Inouye, the Hawaii Democrat; he is asking for a 37 percent increase, or an extra \$372,000 for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, which he chairs.

After a review of the requests, the chairmen were granted only modest increases of 2 percent for Foreign Relations, 8.6 percent for Armed Services, 24.4

1 *Congressional Monitor*, March 14, 1991, p. 2.

2 Quoted in Senator Jesse Helms' statement to the Foreign Relations Committee, January 29, 1991, p. 2.

3 *Congressional Record - Senate*, February 28, 1991, p. S. 2472.

percent for Banking, 23 percent for Finance and 21.4 percent for Indian Affairs. The increases, although seemingly reduced, do not include the rolled-over funds that Congress will allow committees to use this year.

Similar funding increases were requested by House Committee Chairmen: Henry B. Gonzalez, the Texas Democrat and Chairman of the Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs Committee asked for 25 percent more; John Dingell, the Michigan Democrat and Chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, for 15 percent; Morris Udall, the Arizona Democrat and Chairman of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, for 34 percent; Robert Roe, the New Jersey Democrat and Chairman of the Public Works and Transportation Committee, for 21 percent; and Les Aspin, the Wisconsin Democrat and Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, for 33.5 percent.

After several hours of debate, the House approved increases of 7.2 percent for Banking, 14.5 percent for Energy and Commerce, 17 percent for Interior and Insular Affairs, 10 percent for Public Works and 19 percent for Armed Services.

Request Justification. Like Pell, many members sought to justify their requests by arguing that such pressing policy concerns as the savings and loan scandal or the Persian Gulf crisis require taxpayers to give more to congressional committees. But such justifications ignore the fact that Senators surely could perform their important legislative duties by using more effectively the 8,561 staff members and \$53 million budget they now have. Example: If the Senate Banking Committee's current staff of 42 were not able to provide the oversight to prevent the \$300 billion S&L scandal, will more staff be able to do it?

Inouye, meanwhile, says that since he joined the Committee on Indian Affairs, it has increased in popularity and therefore needs extra funds. Senator Dale Bumpers, the Arkansas Democrat, justified one committee's request by stating that more money is necessary to hold hearings in home states of members facing reelection.⁴ Representative Dingell at least is more innovative. He says: "In 1795 this was the only committee," so it had actually lost power vis-a-vis other committees since its creation.⁵ He already employs 142 people on his committee staff.

Slashing Spending? Congress's funding increases for its committees came only months after the passage of the much-vaunted budget agreement that was supposed to slash spending and reduce the deficit. As expected, however, it has done neither.⁶ During floor debate on committee spending this February 28, Senator Helms reminded members of their earlier budget promises by asking "what kind of message will we be sending to the taxpayers back home...increasing our own

4 *Roll Call*, February 11, 1991, p. 5.

5 *Roll Call*, March 4, 1991, p. 11.

6 For further discussion on last year's budget see: Scott Hodge, "Your New Taxes Working for You," The Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 795, November 2, 1990.

staff after a major tax increase.”⁷ His plea has gone unanswered, and the resolution to increase Senate committee spending was passed on a near party-line vote: 41 against and 55 for. Concluded Senator Trent Lott, the Mississippi Republican; “How can we ever convince anyone we are serious about controlling spending if we do not begin here.”⁸

This committee funding feast occurs annually in the House and biannually in the Senate. In fact, since 1946, the legislative budget has soared by more than 3,000 percent. During this period the consumer price index has increased by just over 500 percent.⁹ As recently as 1960, the legislative budget was \$131 million. By last year it was up to \$2.24 billion, an increase of 1,709 percent. Estimated budgets for 1991 and 1992 are higher still: \$2.55 billion and \$3 billion respectively. An annual budget of \$3 billion is the equivalent of \$5.6 million for each member of Congress per year.¹⁰

GROWTH IN LEGISLATIVE APPROPRIATIONS	
Year	Amount (current dollars)
1960	\$131,055,385
1970	\$361,024,327
1980	\$1,199,061,463
1990	\$2,230,497,000
1991	\$2,547,961,000*
1992	\$3,000,000,000*
*Estimated.	

Staff Increase

The explosive growth in legislative expenses certainly raises the question of what Congress is doing with these taxpayer funds. One major expenditure is the 37,388 salaries of the congressional staff. Congress now employs almost 14,000 more staff members than it did in 1980. Congress’s legislative staff in 1987 was nine times greater than that of the Canadian Parliament — the second largest legislative staff in the world.¹¹

Congress’s staff includes cooks (for subsidized cafeterias), beauticians (for subsidized beauty parlors and barber shops), technicians (for members’ personal recording studio), travel agents (to plan tax-paid trips), mail carriers (to deliver taxpayer-funded mail), and personal support staff and committee staff.

Although all areas of the congressional staff have grown, the support staff working directly for members of Congress has almost tripled since 1960, from 6,791 to more than 19,000 today. Committee staff, meanwhile, has also more than tripled, from 910 in 1960 to more than 2,800 today.

Notes the 1989 book *The Imperial Congress*: “[Congress’s] most important legislation is drafted by unelected congressional staff, supported by a network of lob-

7 *Congressional Record* - Senate, February 28, 1991, p. S. 2464.

8 *Ibid.* p. S. 2469.

9 *Vital Statistics on Congress 1989-1990* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1990) p. 128.

10 *Tax Features*, Vol. 35, No. 3, March 1991.

11 *Vital Statistics on Congress 1989-1990*, p. 125.

SUPPORT STAFF GROWTH (Includes committee staff)		COMMITTEE STAFF GROWTH	
1960	6,791	1960	910
1970	11,274	1970	1,337
1980	18,306	1980	3,108
1990	19,371	1990	2,860

Sources for 1960-1980, Republican Study Committee; sources for 1990, Vital Statistics on Congress 1989-1990, American Enterprise Institute, p.132.

byists representing special interests.”¹² This sentiment was echoed by Lott in his February 28, 1991, remarks on the Senate floor: “I have read in publications where staff members were attending conferences in New Orleans on subject matter on which I am supposed to be ranking member. I did not

know they were going down there. We need to tighten up this ship a little.” The explosive growth of congressional staff reflects the increased demands for constituent services, and the members encouragement of those demands for reelection purposes.¹³

Key Role of Staff. In addition to handling the constituent services that help incumbents get reelected, congressional staff often play a direct role in Congressmen’s reelection campaigns. Congressional staff produce the massive taxpayer-funded mailings to constituents that indirectly help incumbents get reelected. Republican and Democrat campaign committees, meanwhile, conduct training seminars for congressional staff during election years to help coordinate campaign strategies with legislative operations. Committee staff also play a key role in helping incumbents obtain federal benefits for voters and campaign contributors.

The congressional staff is the vital resource that enables members of Congress to coerce the Executive Branch. It is this staff that writes the letters, makes the telephone calls, arranges the hearings, and otherwise pressures the federal bureaucracy to serve the interests of Congressmen. Thus, powerful incumbents owe much of their power to their large staffs. It is not surprising that these Congressmen want more staff members.

Congressional staff members are also the essential ingredients in Capitol Hill’s micromanagement of the Executive Branch. Revealing the extent of this micromanagement are the records of the contacts between Congress and major federal departments. The Pentagon, for example, receives 2,500 phone calls every working day and more than 100,000 letters per year from Congress.¹⁴ The Department of Housing and Urban Development, from 1986 to 1987, received an average of 2,425 phone calls per month from Congress.¹⁵

12 Gordon S. Jones and John A. Marini, editors, *The Imperial Congress* (New York: The Heritage Foundation and Pharos Books, 1988) p. 1.

13 *Ibid*, pp. 125-126.

14 Mark Liedl, “Congress’s Busywork,” *The Washington Post Outlook*, January 28, 1990.

15 *Ibid*.

Often such communication between Congress and the federal bureaucracy is not congressional oversight, but strong-arm tactics to pressure the bureaucracy to deliver benefits to a Congressman's state, district or campaign contributors.

Sleight of Hand

Although some increases in committee spending have been approved openly this year, other increases have been disguised by the committees. To appear to be saving taxpayer money, Congress uses an accounting gimmick that allows a roll over of funds left over from a committee's previous budget without having to put such spending on the books. The result: Rolled-over funds give the committee more money to spend while making it appear as though the requested increase has not been granted.

In the case of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Helms revealed during floor debates that the roll over distracts attention from the actual amounts budgeted. For example, the Foreign Relations Committee originally requested a

SENATE COMMITTEES							
Committee	Chairman	Funding 1990*	1991 Request*	Increase	Staff Employed 1970***	Staff Employed 1990***	Increase
Finance	Lloyd Bentsen	\$2,814,065	\$3,526,076	25.30%	16	57	256%
Foreign Relations	Claiborne Pell	\$2,721,004	\$3,183,489	17.00%	31	59	90%
Indian Affairs	Dan Inouye	\$1,021,116	\$1,394,043	37.00%	--	22	--
Armed Services	Sam Nunn	\$2,785,811	\$3,180,965	14.18%	19	52	174%
Banking	Donald Riegle, Jr.	\$2,224,792	\$3,241,529	45.70%	23	42	83%
HOUSE COMMITTEES							
Committee	Chairman	Funding 1990	1991 Request	Increase	Staff Employed 1970***	Staff Employed 1990**	Increase
Foreign Affairs	Dante Fascell	\$3,369,145	\$4,137,733	22.81%	21	100	376%
Armed Services	Les Aspin	\$2,070,657	\$2,765,100	33.54%	37	74	100%
Energy & Commerce	John D. Dingell	\$5,355,000	\$6,300,000	17.65%	42	142	238%
Education & Labor	William D. Ford	\$3,686,681	\$4,353,264	18.08%	77	111	44%
Banking	Henry B. Gonzalez	\$4,045,000	\$4,900,000	21.14%	50	110	120%
<p>*Estimated costs are from Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, Senate Committee Funding: 102nd Congress, 1st and 2nd Sessions, 1991, Committee Print No. 3. **1991 Republican Committee Survey. ***Vital Statistics on Congress 1989-1990, American Enterprise Institute, p.128.</p>							

17 percent increase in its budget for fiscal 1991 that would hike its budget from \$2.7 million to \$3.2 million. The Rules Committee ostensibly approved only a 2 percent increase, to approximately \$2.8 million. Yet, according to Helms, the Rules Committee would also allow \$345,000 in non-recurring funds plus unspent funds from the previous year to be rolled over. Thus, the total 1991 funding recommended by the Rules Committee is \$3,183,488. That is only \$1 less than their original request. All sleight of hand.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Congress, obviously, should practice what it preaches. Just as obviously, Congress does not. Instead, it continues its self-indulgence at the expense of the American taxpayer. If Congress's constant claims of concern over runaway spending are genuine, it should extend line-item veto authority to the President.

For now, Congress should freeze staff and freeze its costs. It should not be allowed to pretend to be concerned with the federal deficit or federal spending, if it can't control its spending on itself.

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16 *Congressional Record* - Senate, February 28, 1991, p. S. 2466.

