

## **The Roads Not Taken – Federal by Dan Jacoby**

Now that Congress has adjourned for the year, it's time to look at the things they failed to accomplish this session.

### **The Budget**

There is actually no specific "budget bill". Instead, there are 11 appropriations bills, each one covering a different aspect of the federal budget. These appropriations bills are supposed to be passed in time for the beginning of the fiscal year on October 1. This year, Congress passed only 2 of the 11. The rest of the budget is being covered under "continuing resolutions" (CR), which allow the government to continue spending money at last year's levels (or a little less).

The first CR allowed the government to continue functioning until November 17. The second CR pushed the deadline back to December 8. We're now in the third CR, giving Congress until February 15 – over one-third of the way through the fiscal year – to get their act together.

### **The United Nations**

John Bolton is out (he should never have been "in" – see #87, "Recess Appointments"). The next Ambassador to the United Nations is ... to be determined.

Technically, this isn't Congress's fault; George W. Bush hasn't picked a nominee yet. But since the outgoing Congress was run by the same party as the White House, they could have gotten together on this important issue. Instead, we enter the new year with nobody running the show.

### **Election Reform**

In view of the election debacles that have occurred all across the country, since the passage of the "Help America Vote Act" (HAVA), one would think Congress would do something to fix the problems. In 2003, a bill was introduced to make things better, but it went nowhere. In 2005, a similar bill was introduced – H.R. 550.

This bill mandates a voter verified paper record for every ballot cast, something the 18,000 voters in Sarasota County, Florida who officially cast no vote for Congress this year could use right now.

The bill would also require that all software and source code used in electronic voting systems be made available for public inspection. Too many electronic machines are programmed by private companies whose bosses have a vested interest in the outcome of elections. Right now, nobody is looking over their shoulders, and nobody knows if the software that counts the votes is legitimate.

There are several other important issues, including requiring a manual audit of the paper records, specific limitations on conflicts of interest, and methods for challenging elections that are not properly held.

H.R. 550 has 222 co-sponsors, a majority of members in the House of Representatives, but the leaders refused to let it come to a vote. It is certain that a new version of this bill will be on George W. Bush's desk early in the new year.

## **Medicare, Part D**

After Congress passed the Medicare prescription drug bill in the middle of the night, it turned out that the cost to the government would be hundreds of billions of dollars higher than the Bush administration told us. Additionally, there were a number of serious flaws with the original bill. Four major flaws were obvious from the start, and are now having their effect on America's elderly.

First, once a senior citizen selects a plan, he or she is stuck with that plan for a full year, even if the plan is changed. This means that a person can get stuck with a plan that doesn't cover his or her needs.

Second, there is a point at which Medicare coverage stops for a while, and the senior citizen has to pay the full cost. This is known as the "doughnut hole", and is costing a lot of people an awful lot of money.

Third, seniors who used to qualify for Medicaid are no longer eligible. That means the poorest among America's elderly are forced to pay much higher prices for drugs they used to get for a lot less under Medicaid.

Fourth, the federal government is specifically prohibited from negotiating with the drug companies for the best possible prices. As a result, we are paying the highest possible costs, instead of the lowest.

There are several bills in Congress that would fix some or all of these problems, as well as others. None of these bills has gotten even so much as a full hearing.

## **Oversight**

The one overriding aspect of the Republican-controlled Congress has been the complete lack of oversight. George W. Bush and his appointees have granted billions of dollars to companies in no-bid contracts, some of which have cost the lives of U.S. servicemen and women in Iraq. Bush has signed secret executive orders that have ripped the Constitution apart at the seams. Under Bush administration orders, American citizens are being held prisoner in secret dungeons, while others are being shipped to Syria to be tortured. Congress, the United Nations, and Americans in general have been misled about 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, the economy, energy policy, and many other areas.

Yet Congress has abdicated its responsibility to provide the needed checks and balances on the executive branch.

New committee chairmen for the next Congress, such as John Conyers and Henry Waxman, have promised real hearings and investigations. Several grass-roots groups are pushing to have these investigations lead to impeachment; despite incoming Speaker Nancy Pelosi's statements to the contrary, these groups might get their wish.

The federal government is very large, and there are thousands of bills introduced by Congress's 535 members every year. To search for a specific bill, or browse by several different factors, go to <http://thomas.loc.gov/>.