
Defense Report

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Does Congress Have Enough Time to Do Its Job?

The second session of the 94th Congress was the first to deal with the full force of the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Act of 1974—a law designed to put Congress more squarely in the driver's seat in establishing annual budgetary goals and spending ceilings.

For the first time in the history of our Nation, Congress had to meet a self-imposed set of target dates by which all authorization and appropriations actions had to be completed. The goals were met but not without sacrifice.

To be sure, Congress did get out a mammoth tax reform bill but Capitol Hill observers remind us that all the House action on the bill had been completed in the previous session. Military appropriations bills were sent to the White House three months earlier than the previous year, but in the rush to wind up the action a variety of important military legislation was left almost untouched.

A Defense Department proposal to modernize the military retirement system has been gathering dust in Congress since 1974. In the meantime defense critics like Representative Les Aspin (D-Wis.) have been making hay with criticism of the present antiquated retirement system. A popular bill to put the officer personnel management systems of all the Services on a common footing finally passed the House late in the session but the Senate chose not to act on it until there is more time for study.

Congress is aware of the problem. Several bills were introduced into the 94th Congress to kill the Budget and Impoundment Act even before its first year of operation because of fear that no legislative time would be available for anything but the most basic things.

Congress compounded the problem this year by agreeing to end the last session of the 94th Congress a full three months before the 95th Congress is scheduled to start. Even if we concede that the month of October should be given over to campaigning the legislators still would have had 60 calendar days to get in some work on the people's business.

If the Budget and Impoundment Act is to work—and it seems to be a step in the right direction—Congress must keep its collective nose to the grindstone.