
Defense Report

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For the Second Year in a Row— Congress Plays Games With Soldier's Pay

When the Congress passed the Budget and Impoundment Act of 1974 broad claims were made for all the good things it would accomplish. Congress and the Executive departments would be forced to work together to assure that all the money bills for an upcoming fiscal year were passed before that year began. That would have meant that every federal operation would have firm funding by October 1 each year and the people who work for the federal government—Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Civil Service employees—would be assured of getting their pay checks on time. Unfortunately, Congress has found ways to frustrate the law.

Fiscal Year 1979 got off to a bad start when Congress got wrapped up in some secondary issues and failed to pass a Defense Appropriations Bill until the 12th of October 1978, while hundreds of thousands of military people, many of whom had no capability to pay bills if they did not get a mid-month paycheck, looked on fearfully. This year the budgeting process for Fiscal Year 1980 was rudely interrupted when the House took a ten-day "district work period" just as the budget cycle was approaching culmination. Action to provide funding continuity by passing a continuing resolution then got tangled with two issues unrelated to the defense money bill; funding for abortions and a pay raise for Congress. The resolution was eventually passed in time to meet payroll demands but not without another period of apprehension on the part of military people.

This latest cavalier treatment by the Congress got the attention of Rep. Les Aspin, the Wisconsin Democrat, who is not always popular with military people. In this instance, though, Aspin rallied to the defense of the federal employees who faced payless paydays. "Ebenezer Scrooge and 19th Century sweatshops sometimes missed paydays," Aspin declared. "And failing businesses may run out of money and go belly-up. But at least theoretically, the federal government doesn't fit into any of those categories." Aspin plans to introduce legislation that would permit federal agencies to go on meeting payrolls in the absence of an appropriation or a continuing resolution.

Only once in its history, during the trauma of the Great Depression, has the Army failed to pay its people on time and that was because, at that instant, the Federal Government was simply out of money. It is Congress' constitutional mission to raise and *support* the Army. These two successive failures to underwrite the worth of soldiers' paychecks constitute flagrant abdication of that responsibility. Military families faced with uncertainty about being able to pay their rent or buy food cannot help but view the prospect of continued service with uncertainty.