
Defense Report

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Our Slow-moving Congress—It Must Find a Faster Way to Get Its Work Done

Serving in the U.S. Senate or the House of Representatives is not such a hot job. The hours are often long, the complexity of legislation is often mind-boggling. There are many demands on the members' time and attention. The pay is not great in light of the responsibilities. And yet men and women go heavily into personal and financial debt to be sworn to serve their state or district.

So we must assume that the members of the House and Senate are well motivated to deal with the legislative needs of the nation. If this is true, then, why does it so often take so long to move important legislation through Congress? The Defense Appropriation Bill, for instance, has not been signed into law on time since 1978. This has forced the government's biggest department to operate on a series of "continuing resolutions" which do not contribute to efficient management and which annually cost the taxpayers many millions of dollars because of the forced ill-management.

Superficially, we might fault Congress for not working hard enough. The *Congressional Quarterly* recently reported that through 30 September, 1982, the House had met just 121 days and the Senate 126 days of the 273 calendar days that had elapsed. Although the Budget and Impoundment Act of 1974 requires that all appropriations bills be passed by 30 September each year only three of the 13 appropriations bills to fund the government had been passed by the time Congress adjourned to campaign for the November election.

Congress really does work hard, but it does not accomplish everything it should. This is a fact of life brought on by the need to scrutinize the operation of the entire Executive Branch each year as part of the budget process. The functioning of the federal government is now far more complex than was ever envisioned by our Founding Fathers.

The time has come to take a serious look at ways to improve the efficiency of the Legislative Branch, just as it seeks to improve the efficiency of the Executive. One move that deserves attention is a switch to multiyear budgeting. Something must be done.