
Defense Report

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The Defense Budget Deadlock—Raising the Cost of Preparedness

Is there anyone still around who can remember the last time Congress approved a defense appropriations bill before the beginning of the fiscal year? Ten years ago, Congress passed a law that was supposed to improve the way it legislates funds to operate the federal government. They delayed the start of the fiscal year from 1 July to 1 October to allow more time for the budget process and to set a precise timetable. Since its inception the schedule has been all but ignored, and it again appears certain that this session of Congress will resort to the time-honored funding loophole called a "continuing resolution."

This year the debate over the defense budget has been more intense than usual. In the spring, bowing to congressional insistence, the President lopped some \$14 billion off his original January proposal. By early August, the House and Senate had passed separate authorization bills, but these remain gridlocked in a joint conference committee, thus delaying any move toward processing the necessary appropriations bill. As long as the House leadership elects to delay markup of the bill there can be no final action on the defense budget.

All this congressional foot-dragging is costing us dearly. And, with the 98th Congress planning to recess in time to campaign for the November elections, the Armed Forces will once again be forced into an expensive, disruptive stopgap funding mode starting with the new fiscal year on 1 October. Leaders in both houses of Congress have indicated opposition to a lame-duck session, meaning that the department can only spend at last year's levels unless specific exceptions are included in the continuing resolution. This leaves unfunded those programs which were scheduled to start in the new year and has disruptive, destabilizing and grossly expensive effects on ongoing programs.

This is not the first collapse of the congressional budget process and it undoubtedly will not be the last. By not passing a defense budget on time, Congress not only digs deeper into the taxpayer's pocket, it seriously impairs the much needed modernization of America's military forces and poses formidable and unnecessary obstacles to their readiness posture.