NATIONAL REVIEW

The CR Charade

Congress keeps ignoring its proper budgetary responsibilities.

By Michael Tanner

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Article 1, Section 9, Clause 7 of the Constitution says that "No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law." Aside from declaring war — something Congress never bothers with any more — few responsibilities are more basic or important for our national legislature.

And, under the rules of the House of Representatives, those appropriations (with certain exceptions) are supposed to be passed in one of twelve appropriations bills. The Congressional Budget Act of 1974 requires Congress to act on appropriation bills by June 30 of each year, although there is no enforcement mechanism if that deadline is missed. More realistically, then, Congress is supposed to act before the start of the new fiscal year, October 1.

Yet Congress has not passed all twelve appropriation bills since 1994. This year, in fact, Congress passed exactly none.

Of course, that's not exactly shocking. Congress didn't pass any last year either. It makes one wonder what exactly we are paying them for.

Actually, that's not entirely fair. The House did manage to pass 7 of the 12 appropriation bills, just nudging itself over .500. On the other hand, the Senate, under the dynamic leadership of Harry Reid, failed to bring even one to the floor for a vote.

Therefore, this September, Congress again resorted to funding the government through a continuing resolution, a catch-all bill, that will fund the government through December 11, when a lame-duck Congress can come back and . . . pass another continuing resolution.

Although generally touted as maintaining 2015 spending at 2014 levels, the bill actually includes increased "authorization" for spending on disaster relief, "overseas contingency operations" (read: war), and other areas, without corresponding offsets. While exact spending on these items won't be known for some time, it is likely that final spending in 2015 will exceed 2014 levels. The increase in OCO spending, while understandable, is particularly problematic since it is not

subject to normal budget rules. In the past, Congress has treated OCO money as something of a slush fund.

Use of a continuing resolution did serve one useful function as far as Congress is concerned. It protected members from having to vote on contentious issues shortly before an election. Thus, the CR continues funding for the Export-Import Bank until June 30, 2015. Needless to say, Obamacare funding also continues. The CR also failed to extend a moratorium on internet bandwidth or e-mail taxes past December.

Most significantly, the CR authorizes the president to arm the Syrian rebels. Thus Congress managed to duck its responsibilities for both war and spending in a single bill. That is efficiency.

The CR is also notable for what it did not do. It did not reform the entitlement programs that threaten to bankrupt this country in the future. It did not reduce corporate welfare. It did not eliminate wasteful or failed programs. It simply rubber-stamped the status quo that has brought us a $17.8 trillion national debt.

No wonder that Senator Tom Coburn (R., Okla.) called the CR "a betrayal" of taxpayers.

But for legislators of both parties, not rocking the boat before an election is exactly what they wanted. The CR passed 319–108 in the House. Just 53 House Republicans voted against it. In the Senate, the vote in favor was 78–22, with a majority of Republicans voting in favor.

For those looking toward 2016, both Senators Rand Paul and Ted Cruz voted "no," while Senator Marco Rubio and Representative Paul Ryan voted "yes."

Conservatives rightly criticize President Obama for avoiding his responsibilities and ducking the hard choices. But Congress, including most congressional Republicans, may not have a lot of room to talk.

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