



## The Budget— America's Billion-Dollar Shame

We *must* force Congress to stop its annual flimflam game and obey a basic mandate: balance the budget!

BY RALPH KINNEY BENNETT

**A**S YOU READ THIS, Congress has once again embarked upon its annual circus of casuistry and confusion, that ultimate exercise in flimflam—adopting a national budget.

For ordinary folk, a budget means just what the dictionary says: "An itemized summary of probable expenditures and income for a given period, usually embodying a systematic plan for meeting expenses." But for the U.S. Congress a budget is a seemingly un-

controllable spending machine that gobbles up all the tax money poured into it and then starts burning that inexhaustible synfuel called credit.

As a result, the federal government has been running up annual deficits of about \$200 billion in recent years. This mortgaging of every American taxpayer's future is all the more insidious because it is so abstract and invisible. But every once in a while, the sheer size of the deficit makes even politicians un-

“budget resolutions” by which Congress sets ceilings on total spending. But the House has repeatedly flouted these self-imposed rules on hundreds of spending measures.

Since passage of the act, government spending has almost quadrupled, and Congress has all but abandoned any pretense of control. In the past two years it has been unable to enact a single appropriations bill. Notes Rep. Joseph J. DiGuardi (R., N.Y.) in dismay, “I hold a plastic card that puts all high-limit credit cards to shame. It’s my Congressional voting card. In an instant, I can insert it in the House computer terminal and vote \$5 million on a water project in Mississippi, \$30 million on an Air Force jet or \$100 million on a federal honey program—whether or not we have the money.”

**Runaway Congress.** Once the end of the fiscal year approaches and the vaunted budget process has collapsed as usual, Congress rolls out its rescue equipment—“continuing resolutions,” or CRs. These are legislative spending bridges to get over the fiscal year deadline amid a cloud of news stories about how the federal government is “about to shut down.”

In recent years CRs have become laden with all the unfinished appropriations work of Congress, including a huge dead weight of pork—billions of dollars’ worth of water, recreation and construction projects for the folks back home. A candid Congressman calls these

“members’ goodies,” and they may be as mundane as \$28 million authorized for a highway in Petoskey, Mich., or as exotic as a \$60,000 grant for “Belgian endive research” at the University of Massachusetts.

Architects of the 1974 Budget Act claimed it would “substantially reduce the likelihood” of CRs. Instead, they grew more common. In 1986, the year Congress couldn’t enact a single appropriations bill, it stuffed all federal spending into a 690-page accountant’s brow-knitter for the President’s reluctant signature.

In 1987 Congress again failed to enact any of the 13 appropriations bills for Reagan to consider and sign. The House and Senate CRs were melded into a 1000-page hybrid, its obscure language and fine print filled with many and varied servings of pork and bizarre and extraneous legislative miscellany. These range from \$8 million to build schools for Jewish North African émigrés in France and \$10 million to prop up the price of sunflower oil to \$350,000 to develop a corn-starch-based plastic and \$50,000 to study New Mexico wildflowers. Like the “temporary” CR of the previous year, this one will run the government for another fiscal year, replacing the normal appropriation procedures the voters should expect from Congress.

“Lumping everything together into one monstrous bill,” observed Washington *Post* columnist David S. Broder, “sharply reduces the

sentatives and Senators festoon it with all manner of budget-bloating favors. The President either vetoes significant legislation, or he signs into law a slew of narrow-interest provisions. Line-item veto power would restore the proper balance between the White House and Congress.

• *Balanced-Budget Amendment.* Reflecting on the great work of the Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I wish it were possible to obtain a single amendment to our Constitution . . . taking from the federal government the power of borrowing." Such an amendment would mandate a balanced federal budget and bring the entire force of the Constitution against government's living beyond its means. Three times, in 1978, 1980 and 1985, Congress pledged its allegiance to balanced budgets and deficit cutting, but then showed itself

too weak to keep the pledges. Already 32 states have called for a limited Constitutional Convention to draft a balanced budget amendment. Only two more state legislatures must issue such a call for the convention to take place.\*

If you believe strongly that you are not undertaxed but that Congress overspends; if you believe that the answer to national challenges is not *more* spending but more considered and careful spending of the huge amount of revenue you already give your government, make your voice heard. Write your Congressman or Senator. Make it clear that you want these two steps to fiscal sanity enacted—in this second session of the 100th Congress.

\*The following states have yet to endorse such a convention: California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin.

*Reprints of this article are available. See page 214.*

### *Come Again?*

Announcement heard in a department store: "Attention, customers. We have a special in our ladies' department, where our underwear is half-off."

—Contributed by Linda Wheattall

From a New York *Times* article: "Speaking from his home, the athlete declined to comment."

In an Asbury Park, N.J., *Press* account of a traffic accident: "A police spokesman said traffic was bottled up completely. It took an hour to restore it to regular congestion."

Quote from Doug Smith in the Los Angeles *Times*: "He said, 'It isn't going to be any one person's park. I think dogs are wonderful. But they've got to be kept on leashes, like everyone else.'"