

PERIODICALS

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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Does Congress Need to Be Fixed?

"The Congressional Brainwashing Machine" by James L. Payne, "The Permanent Democratic Congress" by Norman Ornstein, and "Public Opinion and the 'Congress Problem'" by Everett Carl Ladd, in *The Public Interest* (Summer 1990), 1112 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Who is to blame for Washington's long deadlock over the federal budget deficit and other national issues? Congress has emerged as the favorite culprit of many critics. They tend to think that only structural changes—limitations on congressional terms, campaign finance reform, line-item veto authority for the president—will get the federal government moving again.

Payne, director of Lytton Research & Analysis, is one of those critics. Contrary to much popular supposition, congressmen, he finds, do not become big spenders because they are corrupt or cynical. Rather, in the inbred political world of Washington, virtually nobody tells them to tighten the purse strings. Payne surveyed 1,060 witnesses who testified at 14 congressional hearings dealing with spending programs: Only seven people opposed the spending. Which is hardly surprising considering that 53 percent of the witnesses were federal bureaucrats and congressmen and 10 percent were state or local officials.

Payne regards such practices as part of a "culture of spending" that eventually ensnares most congressmen. One recent study, for example, shows that new congressmen with no prior government experience are more likely to oppose spending programs than are their elders. But after 12 years in office they become very generous with the taxpayers' money. Re-election pressures are not responsible, Payne says. Retiring congressmen do not

suddenly become tightwads. "Brainwashing produces genuine attitude changes," he writes. He believes that only a six term limitation on congressional service will fix the problem.

But Ornstein notes that Republicans have lived to regret their last experiment with fixed terms—the 22nd amendment of 1951, which made Ronald Reagan a lame duck for his entire second term. Moreover, says the American Enterprise Institute researcher, such a limitation would be superfluous. The high (98 percent) reelection rate of congressional incumbents has obscured steady turnover due to retirement and other causes; 55 percent of current members of the House of Representatives were sworn in during the 1980s.

Ornstein also gives short shrift to GOP claims that the advantages of incumbency are responsible for a "permanent Democratic Congress." Even in elections with no Democratic incumbent, Republicans run poorly. Since 1954, they have won only 77 open House seats vacated by Democrats, while Democrats have won 101 open Republican seats. The real problem, Ornstein says, is that the GOP has failed to recruit good candidates. If it wants to win control of Congress, he says, it should plan to do so the old fashioned way—by earning it.

Polls show that Americans actually are quite content with the current "divided" government, with a Republican executive and a Democratic legislature. Ladd, of the

University of Connecticut, argues that this reflects an ambivalence about activist government. The public holds Congress in very low esteem, and a solid majority fa-

vors limits on congressional terms. Americans think that "Congress is a problem," Ladd says, "but they don't know why, or where to turn for answers."

A Kind Word For Benedict Arnold

"Why Benedict Arnold Did It" by Willard Sterne Randall, in *American Heritage* (Sept.-Oct. 1990), 60 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

In grade school, every child learns about the treacherous Benedict Arnold, who coldly sold out his country for £20,000. But Randall, a historian at the University of Vermont, writes that Arnold's treason can be explained, if not excused, by a "long fuse of bitterness."

Arnold's vanity and brashness made him an outsider throughout his military career. His brilliance as a commander was unquestioned. He led the stunning 1775 raid on the British fort at Ticonderoga, which supplied cannon for the siege of Boston, and he headed the bold but ill-fated American advance on Quebec in 1776. When a British force threatened to sail down Lake Champlain and split the colonies, Arnold built a small fleet and turned it back.

But many of his colleagues resented him. Ethan Allen, leader of Vermont's Green Mountain Boys, was the most persistent enemy. The two men squabbled bitterly at Ticonderoga, and in 1776 the envious Allen tried to get Arnold court-martialed for misconduct and misappropriation of funds at Ticonderoga.

Arnold's rivals would call for his court martial at least three more times, accusing him, among other things, of looting in Canada and lining his pockets as military governor of Philadelphia in 1778. His past as a smuggler in New Haven, Connecticut, did not help his credibility. And because many of his personal records had been burned or lost, Arnold was hard pressed to defend himself. "Now found," Randall writes, the papers include "documents that could have saved Arnold endless trouble and that might even have prevented his treason."

The indignities continued to pile up. Congress repeatedly denied Arnold promotion, refused to reimburse his considerable out-of-pocket expenses, and officially reprimanded him for two trifling offenses he committed as governor. Twice wounded in battle, Arnold complained in a 1779 letter to Washington that he had "become a cripple in the service of my country," and "little expected to meet the ungrateful returns I have received from my countrymen."



A contemporary print suggests the violence of popular revulsion at Benedict Arnold's treason.