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But in making that argument, observes Young, a political scientist at the University of Virginia, Hamilton and the other critics ignored the legislature's great successes "under the severest performance test possible—an unprecedented war of liberation by a hastily assembled league of colony/states against the world's most powerful nation." Soon after the British attacked a colonial arms cache at Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775, delegates from the 13 colonies assembled in Philadelphia. "In short order," Young writes, "they organized themselves as a body, adopted rules of secrecy, digested reports of the battle and of British military activities elsewhere, and adjourned into a 'committee of the whole on the state of America' to hammer out a policy. Decidedly different views were aired, competing priorities were argued, and contending proposals were debated." And consensus on a plan of action was reached.

A final petition for redress was sent to the king. In anticipation of rejection, a policy of armed resistance to British use of military force was adopted—and, Young says, "pursued with Hamiltonian energy, secrecy, and dispatch." A committee chaired by George Washington came up with a scheme to supply the colonies with arms and ammunition. Another committee, chaired by Benjamin Franklin, oversaw the creation of a national postal service and of the Committee of Secret Correspondence, which ran an intelligence network. In June, Congress organized a volunteer army and named Washington to lead it. In July, after the Battle of Bunker Hill, Congress issued its unforgettable call to American arms.

During those early days of crisis, Congress also adopted a policy of peaceful coexistence with Indians, undertook to prevent British-sponsored terrorism, and mounted a campaign to drum up public support for the American cause.

If a president had said and done what Congress did in America's first hundred days—not to mention throughout the Revolution—Young observes, he "would surely be ranked high on the short list of great presidents." Perhaps, he concludes, legislative government deserves a second look.

## Legislative Oversights

"A House Divided" by David Segal, in *The Washington Monthly* (Jan.-Feb. 1994), 1611 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Congress, the supposed watchdog of the federal government, has acted more like the proverbial pussycat in recent years, asserts Segal, an editor at the *Washington Monthly*. Not only has it failed to stave off such catastrophes as the savings and loan disaster of the 1980s but it has missed a depressing variety of smaller-scale governmental outrages. Why, to cite one minor example, is there someone in government called the "Federal Inspector of the Alaskan Natural Gas Pipeline," earning \$115,300 a year, "even though no such pipeline exists"?

Congress has plenty of resources to play its watchdog role, Segal notes. The House and Senate have an elaborate network of 247 committees and subcommittees run by a staff of some 3,400 people. Over the past 16 years, the House committees alone held a total of 54,034 hearings—about 20 each day the chamber was in session. "There's also a kennel of accountants and investigators in the General Accounting Office which can be sicked on any subject, not to mention inspectors general in the agencies themselves whose findings can be used to pursue inquiries," Segal observes.

But Congress seldom uses its investigative resources effectively, he says. Only two committees—Government Operations in the House and Government Affairs in the Senate—are exclusively devoted to oversight, and they are the least popular ones among members of the two bodies. Other committees have oversight subcommittees, Segal notes, "but their work has been extremely uneven. Today, only a few legislators—most notably John Dingell (D.-Mich.) of the House Oversight and Investigations subcommittee of Energy and Commerce—have earned reputations as strong and thorough overseers. It's far easier, and more comfortable, to make a name as a participant in deals rather than a spoiler of them."

Of course, many legislators are reluctant to ask tough questions about federal dollars headed to their home districts or states. More often, as

## Populist Poppycock

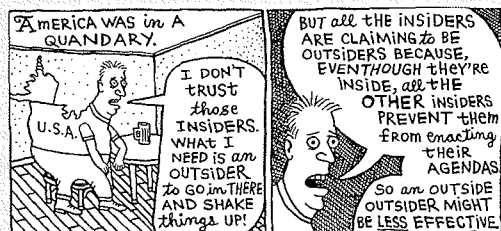
Recent populist exhortations to rescue government from the special interests and give it back to the people have a fatal flaw, Jonathan Rauch, author of *Demosclerosis* (1994), observes in the *New Republic* (June 6, 1994).

In America today, the special interests and "the people" have become objectively indistinguishable. Groups are us. As a result, the populist impulse to blame special interests, big corporations, and political careerists

for our problems—once a tonic—has become Americans' leading political narcotic. Worse, it actually abets the lobbying it so righteously denounces.

Begin with one of the best known yet most underappreciated facts of our time: Over the past three or four decades we have busily organized ourselves into interest groups—lobbies, loosely speaking—at an astonishing rate. Interest groups were still fairly sparse in America until about the time of World War II. Then they started proliferating, and in the 1960s the pace of organizing picked up dramatically.

Consider, for instance, the number of groups listed in Gale Research's *Encyclopedia of Associa-*



tions. The listings have grown from fewer than 5,000 in 1956 to well over 20,000 today. They represent, of course, only a small fraction of America's universe of interest groups. . . .

The concept of the special interest is not based on nothing. It is, rather, out of date, an increasingly empty relic of the time of machine politics and political bosses, when special interests were, quite literally, special. Simply because of who they were, they enjoyed access that was available to no one else. But the process of everyone's organizing into more and more groups can go only so far before the very idea of a special interest loses any clear meaning. At some point one must throw up one's hands and concede that the hoary dichotomy between special interests and "us" has become merely rhetoric.

it happens, the dollars are going to someone else's home base—but there is a strong urge to go along and get along. Legislators, even the best of them, face a basic conflict, Segal observes. Making new laws requires them to round up all the support they can from their colleagues—and checking up on how well existing laws are being implemented is one way to lose friends fast.

The news media do little to encourage rigorous congressional oversight, Segal notes. "What creates press interest are the sensational, scam du jour hearings"—not the unglamorous digging into the nuts and bolts of government programs.

Legislators who are willing to ask hard questions are often stymied by the sheer size

of their legislative domains. As chair of the Senate's Labor and Human Resources Committee, Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), for example, is supposed to keep an eye on the Department of Health and Human Services, an agency with 127,000 employees, an annual budget of \$641 billion, and 250 different national health and welfare programs. "Kennedy may be equal to the task," Segal writes, "but it's hard to believe he could be without slighting the roughly 220 hearings held last year by the nine other committees on which he sits."

Segal doubts that the fundamental problem the legislators have is going to go away. Law-making and oversight are just "two radically different, virtually contradictory" things.