

Budget chicken

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

You may not have noticed it, but most of the federal government has been operating without a budget for the last couple of months. The mail has been delivered, air traffic has been controlled, the Federal Bureau has been investigating and other functions have continued at last year's budget levels under a temporary authorization called a "continuing resolution."

The resolution expires Friday, meaning there will have to be a budget deal by then - or another continuing resolution. Theoretically, the entire government could shut down, although neither Democrats nor Republicans appear serious enough about the game they're playing to take that step. This game is strictly for scoring political points, and shutting down the government is much too risky.

At issue is President George W. Bush's born-again fiscal conservatism and the Democratic Congress' intention to raise spending levels for domestic programs. There's also the Democrats' refusal to give the president any more "emergency" money for the war in Iraq without tying it to specific dates for troop withdrawals.

Last weekend, budget negotiators thought they had worked out a deal that would have let Congress pass the appropriations bills and adjourn for the holidays: House Democrats would give the president \$30 billion more for the war in Afghanistan, knowing that the Senate would add more for the war in Iraq. In return, the president would allow Democrats to increase domestic spending by \$11 billion. The deal collapsed at the last minute over a threatened presidential veto.

Now the threat levels are escalating: House Appropriations Chairman David Obey, D-Wis., says he'll roll all of the outstanding appropriations bills into one omnibus bill. It will meet the president's call for a bill costing no more than \$933 billion but will strip the president's pet domestic projects (such as abstinence-only education and high-tech border controls) out of the bill, along with all of the House members' prized "earmarks" for pet projects in their home districts.

And from the White House comes a threat to start sending out layoff notices - just in time for the holidays - to civilian employees of the Defense Department. Defense budgeteers say with straight faces that that's the only way to make sure there's enough money to continue fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Obey, no slouch himself at inserting earmarks into appropriations bills (more than \$90 million this year alone, according to the watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense), knows how precious those goodies are to most members of Congress. By threatening to remove them, he's hoping to persuade Republicans to pressure the White House to make a deal.

But House Republican leaders - including House Whip Roy Blunt of Missouri, who is a Top 10 earmarker with \$40 million worth of goodies - say they won't fall for Obey's trick. They say it's more important for Republicans to reclaim their franchise as the party that cares about fiscal responsibility.

The logic is confusing. Republicans are willing to continue sending almost unlimited amounts of money to Iraq, but they believe they still can claim to be conservatives by cutting spending at home.

Meanwhile the Democrats, unaccustomed as they are to fiscal responsibility, continue trying to use it as a wedge to set troop withdrawal deadlines that the president says are unacceptable.

Republicans have to choose between their earmarks and their president. Democrats have to choose between their principles and the prospect of furloughed federal employees back home. Neither side can afford to be blamed for shutting down the government, so in the end, there either will be a deal or another continuing resolution.

In the meantime, it's fascinating political theater. Not particularly good government, but good theater.

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