

GOP paid price for a lazy Congress

by By The Peoria (Ill.) Journal S

History may show the 109th Congress ranking among the lamest of ducks. Lawmakers had dragged themselves out of a post-Thanksgiving stupor and reluctantly waddled back to Washington, D.C., for a session to deal with the oh-so-boring task of governing. Well, sort of. See, Congress controls the nation's purse strings. Appropriations bills set funding levels for everything from education to veterans care to national parks. But this year the Fightin' 109th, focused more on the mid-term campaign, decided to punt on nine of 11 spending bills, dealing only with homeland security and defense before an Oct. 1 deadline.

Meanwhile, rather than do what they were elected to do, lawmakers literally passed the bucks - 460 billion of them - to the incoming Democratic Congress by popping out a few stopgap resolutions to keep federal funds rolling until mid-February.

Predictably, there was a flurry of late legislation. In its last gasp, the Republican-led Congress sent to President Bush bills extending some 20 tax breaks (worth \$38 billion over five years) for the likes of college tuition, business research and development, and teaching supplies; extending trade agreements with developing nations; stopping a Medicare payment cut to doctors that could prove doubly costly next year; sharing civilian nuclear technology with India; allowing oil and gas drilling in the Gulf of Mexico; promoting alternate energies; and funding programs to fight AIDS and other pandemic diseases. Some of this legislation is worthwhile, but is it any wonder Uncle Sam can't balance the books?

This isn't the first Congress to miss an appropriations deadline. But this flock stands out for its sheer sluggishness, usually having a workweek that lasted from late Tuesday to mid-Thursday. Nice work if you can get it ... at \$165,200 a year. Indeed, the 109th met for just 102 days (often half-days) this year, a low watermark that drew comparisons to the "Do-Nothing Congress" of 1948, which worked a whopping 110 days. At least those legislators passed the Marshall Plan, laying out reconstruction of post-World War II Europe; adopted the Clean Water Act; and created the CIA. Little this group did is likely to compete with any of that. Democrats would be wise to remember that when they take control next month.

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