

Nation Trembles as Congress Reassembles

by [Robert Higgs](#)

The gang that Mark Twain called "America's only native criminal class" has returned to Washington. Get ready for a lot of bad news. So long as Congress remains in session, everyone's life, liberty, and property will be in heightened jeopardy.

In a government of divided powers, our national legislature is the most craven and irresponsible branch. Congress attracts a special breed of men and women. They are ambitious to get and to keep their offices. They are willing to do almost anything, so long as it is dishonorable, to remain in their positions. Think of Congress as a glorified brothel, and ask yourself what kind of people work in a brothel. When they are not out hustling money for their campaign funds, they are dreaming up ways to claim credit they do not deserve and to shift the blame they do deserve.

In any event, they're back at work now, and they've a lot to do. Well, actually they have only one thing to do; they always have just one thing to do, and that's to get themselves reelected. The next election will take place on November 5, so there's not much time left for these harlots to do what they do best. Look for them to work overtime.

For the next two months, we'll all be bombarded by salvos of TV advertising paid for by the people who give money to the members of Congress so that after those members have been reelected, they'll give the taxpayers' money to their supporters, who will realize a ten-thousand-percent rate of return on their investment. These TV ads will show Congressman Smedley, smiling like a freshly painted clown, standing arm in arm with the handsome Mrs. Smedley and the couple's four well-scrubbed teenage brats, all of whom will be flashing the same wholesome, toothy, moronic smiles. What a fine family they must be! Against a background consisting of a gently waving U.S. flag and a patriotic sound track, the message will be thrust at the viewer: vote for

Smedley; his scumbag opponent would screw you even worse.

Meanwhile, these worthy public servants have to keep themselves busy in Washington for a few weeks before they can evacuate the DC swamps and rush back to Peoria to embrace the geezers in nursing homes and to kiss ass in corporate offices and union halls. In particular, they must occupy themselves now in drawing up plans for a gigantic new federal bureau, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). It won't be easy, so don't be surprised if they don't get it done before the election.

The problem, you see, is that Congress divides its "business" into a multitude of fiefdoms ruled by committee chairmen and chairmadams. In each area, these robber barons hold nearly all the power in their grubby hands. Because Congress divides the power in this way, the interest groups that want to feast at taxpayer expense have to get past the relevant barons first, and for that privilege they must pay. Congress is nothing if not an organization built on the principle of quid pro quo.

Right now, congressional oversight of the more than twenty agencies slated to be combined in the new Department of Homeland Security is divided, according to a White House count, among eighty-eight committees and subcommittees. Spending for the new agency's component parts now gains its approval from ten of the thirteen appropriations subcommittees. So, a great many members of Congress now possess a valuable piece of the action. Do you think they are eager to give up the very powers they wield to extract dough and deference from petitioners who seek what only they can give? Not bloody likely. Already, more than fifty hearings have taken place on homeland security matters.

To make matters even more complicated, President Bush is insisting that he be given authority to hire, fire, and set pay rates for the estimated 170,000 employees of the new department, thereby robbing the barons of their patronage and cutting into the power of the public-employee unions. Senator Joseph Lieberman has let it be known that the president is asking much too much, and Senator Robert Byrd, the evil procedural genius of the upper house, is pawing the earth and expressing grave reservations about the administration's DHS proposal.

Besides the DHS job, which probably won't get done on time, Congress intends to explore how much damage it can do by monkeying with employee-pension arrangements, a terrorism-insurance subsidy, a

massive prescription-drug giveaway, and federal aid to so-called faith-based providers of government largess. You want to talk about something faith-based, then talk about the beliefs of people who suppose that anything good can come out of Congress's fiddling with such matters. Why not be honest and call the post-election session that looms not the lame-duck session but the lame-brain session.

All this, of course, is but democracy in action, so eat it up, all you democrats. But if you are going to select representatives to the ruling crowd by means of what H. L. Mencken called "advance auctions of stolen goods," don't be surprised if you wake up and find yourself subject to people who make ordinary pickpockets look, by comparison, nearly noble.

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