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The imperial Congress

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Quiz: How much do you think it costs U.S. taxpayers annually to support each member of the U.S. House of Representatives? Each senator? Well, according to the new U.S. budget, you, Mr. and Mrs. Taxpayer, spend \$3.1 million to support each House member and \$9 million to support each senator.

Back in 1963 when John F. Kennedy was president, the entire legislative branch of the U.S. government only cost \$192 million, but in 2008 the legislative branch is projected to cost a whopping \$4.8 billion. Adjusting for inflation, the cost of the entire Congress has been rising 3 times faster than the price level, yet the number of members has remained static -- thank goodness -- at 435 representatives and 100 senators, for a total of 535.

One could argue that since the population of the U.S. has grown about 35 percent over the last 45 years, it takes more congressional staff to service the increased number of the electorate, but even so the real cost of Congress is still growing more than twice as fast as the population.

Our American Founding Fathers had envisioned serving in Congress as a part-time job. Citizen legislators would come to Washington a few weeks in the winter (before the beginning of the planting season, because many were active farmers) and tend to the nation's business before going back home to attend to their own business.

Members of Congress did not have personal staff. They wrote their own speeches and did their own homework. The idea of a large number of personal staff for each member did not take hold until after World War II, which was, in part, a response to the big government Congress had created during the Depression and the War.

Again, \$4.8 billion is a lot of money. How does Congress manage to spend that much on itself? Well, Congress spends about a half-billion dollars on the office of "Architect of the Capitol." You may think "the place was built 200 years ago, so why does Congress need to spend all of that money now on an architect?" The reply will be that the "architect's" office is responsible for repair and maintenance of not only the Capitol but all those buildings surrounding it where members and staffs have their offices. Also, Congress keeps enlarging the Capitol. Both the East and West Fronts have been expanded in the last half-century, and now a huge and very expensive "visitors center" is being built under the lawn of the East Side.

Congress spends about \$300 million a year on the Capitol Police, which is a very big hunk of change to protect 535 people and a few buildings. It works out to about \$560,000 per member per year. (Note: the Capitol is in the City of Washington, which has a police department, the National Park Police that patrols federal grounds, the FBI, the Secret Service, etc.) Congress also spends about \$1 billion on the Library of Congress (\$949 million to be more exact) -- which is a lot for books and papers (particularly when most stuff is now free on the Internet). It spends \$524 million on the Government Accountability Office -- sort of an internal audit firm -- and this is the one place, perhaps, Congress should spend more.

After you subtract the above activities and a few others from the \$4.8 billion, you are down to only \$903 million for the 100 senators to spend on themselves, their staffs and expense accounts, leaving the poor 435 members of the House with only the last \$1.35 billion to split up. Members of Congress will tell you they need all this extra money because the federal government has gotten so big it needs more oversight.

Two questions: Who is responsible for making the federal government so big? If the government needs more oversight, how come members of Congress spend far less time in Washington doing "oversight" than they used to?

Normally, when an organization spends a lot more money per person, it expects to acquire higher-quality, more productive employees. Question: If the current Congress is so much better than that of a half-century ago and that of two centuries ago, why is its standing in the public polls at a record low (even lower than that of an unpopular president)?

Most Americans, probably, would have a higher regard for a Congress where the members had real jobs and only came to Washington as citizen legislators for a few weeks during the year, than a Congress where the new House speaker demands a larger private jet than the last speaker had.

Hint to the new congressional leadership: We already have more laws, regulations and taxes than we want or need, so, unless you are going to undo the mess you have created, please just stay home and don't spend any more of our money. We promise to give you high poll numbers in return.

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