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October 23, 1990

Dear C-Span - 3587-96

I'm one of your rare viewers who writes in defense of Congress!

After watching hour upon hour of your wonderful coverage, I've come to a new understanding of the role of Congress and a new admiration of the Constitution which makes the system possible.

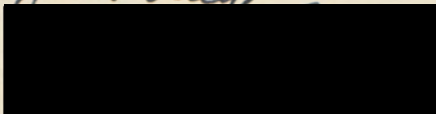
As in any corporation that employs thousands of people there are incompetent self-seeking people and a percentage of waste of time, effort and money. However, I have seen expertise on a wide-range of subjects, great intellect and dedication from the majority of Senators and Representatives.

The enclosed column by Peter L. Kahn in today's Washington Post, expresses my feelings about the argument for limiting terms of office. Also enclosed is an article concerning salaries of House staff that I find interesting and revealing.

I am a Senior Citizen (age 64) with 4 married children (age bracket 30-40 years) and 9 grandchildren (age 0-10 years). I, and my family are concerned and affected by all the subjects being debated and acted upon.

I'm satisfied that my government is
serving me and my family well.

Yours truly,



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Turnover High for House Staff

Survey Finds Large Pay Gap

By Dana Priest
Washington Post Staff Writer

Fifty percent of the staff members who work in House members' Capitol Hill offices have been on the job for a year or less, reflecting an overall decline in staff tenure in the last three years, according to a survey released yesterday.

The Congressional Management Foundation, a non-profit management consulting firm, had no explanation for the decline but noted that average salaries of House staff members in Washington lag about \$7,000 behind those of white-collar federal employees here.

The average salary for House staff members was \$32,297. Federal employees who work in executive departments and agencies here make an average of \$39,472.

As the longevity of staff declines, "you have people who are the prime advisers to members of Congress who have been around for only one session," said Richard Shapiro, executive director of the foundation. "Their perspective is very limited."

The foundation did not survey any of the House committees, where many of the most senior and highly paid staff members work.

House staff members are not covered under most laws that apply to federal employees in the executive or judicial branches.

Each House member is given an annual \$441,120 budget for salaries and benefits for personal office staff. Members can hire as many as 18 full-time and four part-time staff members to work in their Washington and district offices.

Members can juggle the budget to pay fewer people higher salaries if they wish.

As of Oct. 1, House members were required to pay employees the minimum wage of \$3.85 per hour. There is a salary ceiling of \$90,804.

On Sunday, the House voted to cut the House administrative budget by \$16 million, effectively defeating a measure that would have increased members' staff budgets by \$50,000 a year.

The foundation sent surveys to the personal offices of 435 House members and received responses from 215, or 49 percent.

The responses indicate that House aides stayed on the job an average of 2.9 years, compared to 3.4 years in 1987, a 15 percent decline.

Fifty-two percent of the legislative assistants, 39 percent of the legislative directors and 31 percent of the administrative assistants have been on the job for one year or less. The average age of people in these positions is 26, 32 and 38, respectively.

Shapiro said many members of Congress do not have the necessary management skills to retain staff without raising their pay. Others would rather replace an experienced aide looking for a salary increase with a novice willing to work for less. "What I don't think is understood is the price they pay in turnover," said Shapiro.

The survey found that black House staff members receive 89 percent of the pay of their white counterparts and make up 9.4 percent of the total staff. Nationally, black civilian workers make an average of 77 percent of the salary of white workers and account for 10.8 percent of the work force.

Female staff members make 81 percent of the pay of male House staff.

The foundation found that educational achievement was related to job position and salary. House staff members with law degrees make \$18,000 more than those with only bachelor's degrees. Staff members with doctorate degrees make an average of \$48,530 a year—\$20,473 more than those with bachelor's.

For the Record

From remarks by New York Gov. Mario Cuomo at New York University on Oct. 16:

All of this [discussion of fiscal reform in budget-making] is on the assumption that how much you spend is the relevant test, and that's great if you're a permanent critic or an academic. . . .

In the world of the advocate, in the world of the critic, it is enough to say "the spending is too high" and make the whole virtue reduction in spending. But that is not the real world of our needs and proper governance. Spending is not bad; spending may be absolutely essential. And the spending we have done when I tell you it is not the highest in the nation that is not to say I believe we would commit a sin if it were.

Because what we spend on we need to spend on and maybe in some cases we should have spent more. . . .

If we argue about contracting expenditures, it's only because we must. It's only because in the real world, in the practical world, to keep ourselves intact, to give ourselves any strength at all, we have to be prudent. And we have to control. But don't make the mistake of thinking if I suggest to you that we have found a lot of devices for controlling spending it's because we've satisfied all our needs; it is not. It is our concession to the practicalities. . . .

You must balance the budget. That's the frustration of this place, that you're not just an advocate, that you have to deal in the real world. But understand, as we balance the budget, we have another and greater mission, and that is to use government to deal with the problems of people. . . .

EDITOR

The lead paragraph of the front-page article on the Democrats' budget is explicitly wrong and misleading. It describes "a deficit reduction package crafted by Democrats that would significantly raise income taxes on the wealthy and provide tax breaks for the poor and middle class."

The fact is, the Democrats' plan was a significant tax increase for the working middle class. The Democrats have, once again, taken aim at the wealthy and hit the middle class right between the eyes. Under their plan, a working family of four with taxable income of \$44,800 would realize a tax increase of \$700. In addition, according to the National Taxpayers Union, during the five-year life of the Democratic budget, a working family of four earning \$35,200 of taxable income would have to pay an additional \$2,000 in taxes.

The Post owes it to the country to report accurately that the Democrats' plan is a tax increase for all Americans.

NEWT GINGRICH

U.S. Representative (R-Ga.)

Republican Whip

Washington

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domain is hardly evidence of preferential treatment.

At the core of our repeated refusals of The Post's requests for information about specific tax accounts is the issue of confidentiality. Our confidentiality requirements are legally binding and intended to protect all taxpayers. Further, the accepted philosophy of tax professionals everywhere is that by vigorously protecting our audit and collection processes from disclosure, we protect the tax system itself from those who would abuse it if they had access to specific procedures. Thus by not releasing information we serve the interests of all honest, law-abiding taxpayers.

In addition to ensuring the integrity of the system by adhering to the confidentiality policy, we must honor the rules governing our participation in information-sharing programs between the District and other jurisdictions. We, along with other tax professionals across the country, believe that the government and the governed have a better working relationship when the former protects the confidentiality of the latter's private financial details. Therefore, we will not violate our legal and professional obligations by discussing the specifics of any taxpayer's account and plan no further comment.

HAROLD L. THOMAS

Director

Department of Finance and Revenue

Government of the District of Columbia

Washington

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Peter L. Kahn

A Word in Defense of Incumbents

The next earthquake in California will probably be a political one. Proposals to limit the time politicians hold office are on the November ballot, and likely to pass. A measure to throw the rascals out just passed in Oklahoma, and others are under consideration in Colorado, Missouri and elsewhere. There is even talk of a constitutional amendment that would, in the name of good government, sweep from office the likes of Sam Nunn, Bill Bradley and Peté Domenici.

Thanks, but I'd rather keep those rascals in. Few proposals seem less likely to produce good government.

Limiting tenure limits the expertise and experience of those facing the complex and subtle problems of government. This is not just because less time passes while a politician holds office. Because his time is limited, he has less reason to spend time understanding policy issues. Though it may seem those clowns don't have expertise anyway, think what the military might look like without a Sam Nunn or Barry Goldwater to keep tabs on it. Power inevitably will be transferred to bureaucrats and lobbyists around long before and long after the brief life span of the legislator.

Officeholders can spend time saved not thinking about their present job by thinking about the next. They'd only be sensible to consider the opportunities they'll have when their short time in government is over. While some might trust to the fates, others will take more direct action to ensure their futures. Incumbents will not only be less able; they'll be more corrupt.

Weak incumbents invite weak challengers. It takes less to beat them. Possible candidates with attractive private careers are less likely to disrupt those careers to participate briefly in government. The field will offer unusual opportunities to the undesirable. Fringe candidates like David Duke might well be attracted to such opportunities.

Imagine, then, a contest between two poor candidates, each with a weak grasp of issues and little record. The result seems sure to be ever more vicious and irrelevant campaigns and a premium on image and innuendo, cheapening an already degraded electoral process.

And once these brave new legislators get into office, they'll have just a few short years to make their mark. Better get busy. No climbing the ladder of leadership for them: pull out all the stops to get your program, or just to get attention. If they're all short-timers, there will be no leaders to corral the disruptive, teach the unwashed, or frame balanced policies. If you think Congress is chaotic now, just wait.

It's hard to see why we'd want these measures. The idea seems to be that term limits will make politicians more responsive to the voters. But a lame-duck incumbent, without hope of reelection and immune to the voters'

Term limitations and the mythic appeal of the citizen-legislator.

wrath, can pursue his own agenda. The term-limited legislature will contain a large number of members in their last terms contemplating retirement. That government would be less—not more—responsive.

Incumbents do win with almost disgusting regularity. That's not completely strange: people win the first time because they have some appeal for the voters, a characteristic not all challengers share. But they also have some powerful advantages, due largely to the bizarre system of campaign finance created after the Watergate scandal. That's a system ripe for reform.

But the dramatic unintended results of the Watergate reforms tell us it's not easy to improve the electoral process. Term limits have a lot in common with Mr. Bush's "read my lips" tax pledge: lots of quick fix and sex appeal, not much attention to unpleasant details. Simple answers aren't always so simple.

The citizen-legislator has almost a mythic appeal as a Mr. Smith who'd go to Washington and give voice to the plain common sense of the people. Mr. Smith, of course, was a Hollywood creation, designed to appeal to our vanity. It's comfortable to think we'd have good government if only those politicians would listen to us. But the budget mess arose because they were already trying too hard to give us what we wanted. We have met the enemy and, as usual, it is us.

What term limitation advocates have in common is the belief that Congress fouled things up. They want to stick it to politicians who didn't do what they should have. But what should the politicians do? Agreement on that little issue will be no greater after term limitation than before.

To quote Jack Gargan, a leader of the term limitation movement, "we can't do any worse" than the current incumbents. Oh, yes we can. Just wait and see.

The writer is an assistant professor of law at Catholic University.

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