

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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For U.S. Congress, “Recess” Is Anything But Vacation

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 26 December 2013

Washington — U.S. news outlets regularly highlight for Americans, who work an average of 260 days per year, that their well-paid representatives in Congress are scheduled to meet an average of only 140 days per year, spending the rest of their time in recess — or “on vacation” as some reporters describe it.

The year 2013 was an especially difficult one for members of Congress concerned about their public images. Passing only 64 pieces of legislation, the 113th Congress has been lampooned as the “do-nothing Congress” and is now officially the least productive Congress in U.S. history. The U.S. government shutdown in October did nothing to improve its popularity.

In a December 26 CNN poll, 68 percent of Americans questioned said the current Congress is the worst in their lifetimes, with only 28 percent disagreeing.

However, the popular image of America’s legislators as lazy based on all the days they are away from Washington is a false one. Congressional recesses help U.S. politicians meet a fundamental need to directly engage with the people they have been elected to represent.

NOT ALL THE WORK HAPPENS IN WASHINGTON

When Congress goes on recess, individual members are not heading to a beach, a mountain resort or an upscale retreat to spend time wooing wealthy campaign donors.

Recess means members of Congress can return home and interact with citizens of their state or district. Many members of Congress hold open meetings that allow anyone the chance to directly confront them — or occasionally even praise them — for their performance. Visits to struggling businesses and impoverished neighborhoods allow senators and representatives to restate their campaign promises to work for improvements and recap progress made.

Congressional recesses also help politicians build closer relationships with the local press, who frequently cannot afford to send a journalist to Washington to cover Congress directly.

The U.S. Founding Fathers probably never anticipated the negative perception of a short legislative year. The U.S. Constitution does not state how much time Congress needs to meet in Washington, and service in Congress was very much a part-time occupation for many decades. At the state level, many legislatures still only meet for a

few weeks of each year.

An early American ideal for political representation was a member of Congress who stayed in close touch with constituents. That key job requirement persists, despite the fact that members of Congress now can travel to and from Washington in a few short hours by plane, in sharp contrast to the days or even weeks it took on horseback or train in the nation’s early decades.

A close connection with constituents is especially important for members of the U.S. House of Representatives, who must run for re-election every two years. An incumbent would be at a significant disadvantage if he or she had to be always in Washington, away from the voters, while challengers directly engaged voters and painted the incumbent as “out of touch.”

In American politics, one political strategy often employed effectively is to label an incumbent as a “Washington insider” who cares more about power struggles in Washington than about those of the home district.

HOLDING PUBLIC TRUST MEANS BECOMING PUBLIC PROPERTY?

From the nation’s founding, representatives’ return home meant a chance to reintegrate into the lives they knew before entering politics. It allows them to be approached by anyone at anytime, whether in a grocery store or at a movie theater, and asked about their performance.

As President Thomas Jefferson reportedly informed a visiting German dignitary in 1804, when an American “assumes a public trust, he should consider himself as public property.” Most members of Congress probably would agree.

In a September 10 entry on his website, entitled “August is No Vacation,” Republican Representative John J. Duncan Jr. from Tennessee said, “I have around 700,000 bosses, and I try to vote the way my constituents want me to.” He concluded a blog entry explaining in detail how he spent his weeks away from Washington by saying, “I will take under consideration every thought and comment from my many bosses I met with during August.”

Despite the criticism they receive for their days away from Washington, most members of Congress that fill their recess time engaging their constituents find their efforts are appreciated. Many of the same polls that show Americans give Congress as a whole record-low marks for performance also report that at least half of those responding say their own representative is doing a good job.

Labor Dept. Awards \$5 Million to Reduce Child Labor in Burma

24 December 2013

Washington — The U.S. Labor Department's Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) has awarded \$5 million to the International Labour Organization to help reduce child labor in Burma and support the Burmese government's efforts to comply with international standards.

The grant to the ILO is for a project that will:

- Support research and collection of data on the extent and nature of child labor in Burma.
- Build the capacity of national and local organizations to carry out efforts to reduce child labor.
- Implement pilot programs to remove or prevent children from involvement in exploitative labor.
- Raise awareness about child labor in the country.

"This project will develop effective strategies for reducing child labor in Burma," said Deputy Undersecretary of Labor for International Affairs Carol Pier. "It will expand understanding of the extent and nature of the problem and help stakeholders in the country increase efforts to protect children."

The project involves collaboration among government agencies and ministries at the national, regional and local levels, including Burma's Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security. It will also work with workers' organizations, employers' organizations, civil society organizations and teachers.

Since 1995, ILAB projects have rescued approximately 1.7 million children from exploitative child labor, the department says. The Labor Department has funded 275 such projects implemented by more than 65 organizations in 93 countries. ILAB currently oversees more than \$245 million of active programming to combat the worst forms of child labor. The 12th edition of ILAB's Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor is available on the department's website, where more information is also available.

For more information about the Labor Department's efforts to reduce child labor globally through its cooperative agreements, read Pier's blog post *Transforming Dreams for Child Laborers*.

Agriculture Secretary Cites Progress at U.S.-China Commission

24 December 2013

Washington — The 24th U.S.-China Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade (JCCT), which wrapped up

December 23 in Beijing, made progress on a number of trade issues, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack reports.

The JCCT is the highest level bilateral forum for the resolution of trade and investment issues between the United States and China. U.S. Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker and U.S. Trade Representative Michael Froman co-chaired the forum with China's Vice Premier Wang Yang.

"My discussions with Premier Li Keqiang and other Chinese leaders laid the groundwork for future cooperation related to our shared interests in food security, food safety and sustainability, as well as the expansion of export opportunities for American farmers and ranchers," Vilsack said in a press release issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) December 23.

At the JCCT, representatives discussed a number of high-priority issues for agriculture, including market access for beef and horticultural products, the approval process for biotechnology products and import suspensions for four states related to avian influenza, USDA said.

On beef access, the United States and China agreed to continue discussions aimed at restoring market access by the middle of 2014. Regarding horticulture, Vilsack reaffirmed a pathway for reopening China's market for Washington apples and California citrus.

Vilsack also said China needs to streamline its biotech approval process, and committed to begin implementing a pilot program on review of biotechnology products, according to USDA. China agreed to discuss U.S. concerns regarding China's requirement for the use of viable seed in applications for biotechnology approvals.

On avian influenza, the secretary raised lifting bans on poultry due to avian influenza. China responded that it was analyzing information provided by USDA.

In separate discussions with Agriculture Minister Han Changfu, Vilsack shared a proposal for a revised memorandum of understanding focused on science and technology cooperation in the field of agriculture, USDA said.

The two countries committed to hold a second high-level agricultural symposium in 2014, with support from the U.S.-China Agriculture and Food Partnership. The recently formed partnership hosted a reception in honor of Vilsack's visit. Attendees included a broad range of U.S. and Chinese agribusiness leaders and high-level Chinese government officials, USDA said.

USAID Awards \$6 Million to Empower Women Affected by Conflict

24 December 2013

Washington – The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has awarded more than \$6 million for programs aimed at protecting and empowering women in areas affected by crisis, conflict and transition.

USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator Sarah Mendelson announced the awards during a December 19 event at which participants discussed USAID's implementation of the two-year-old U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

Since the plan was established, USAID has "enhanced and accelerated long-standing efforts to bring women's participation, perspectives and skills to bear on the challenges facing societies threatened by crisis, conflict and insecurity," according to Making Progress, USAID's report highlighting its implementation of the plan.

The new funds are intended to help USAID offices build on already successful programs and start new activities to benefit the following populations:

- In Papua New Guinea, USAID programs will aim to increase the capacity of women's civil society organizations that can provide recovery services for survivors of conflict-related trauma and domestic and sexual violence, and advocate for the implementation of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville's National Action Plan.
- In Kenya, USAID funding will strengthen the ability of female leaders to participate in decision-making at local and national levels of government by defining resources and needs, and by building a network of women leaders to mentor and provide peer-to-peer teaching.
- In Sierra Leone, USAID programs will provide effective services for survivors of gender-based violence by improving existing referral systems and police-response procedures, and by developing a network of safe shelters.
- In Libya, USAID will aim to expand the potential of women entrepreneurs through business skills training, improve women's access to financing through brokered relationships with financial institutions, and offer matching grants and technical assistance to accelerate business growth and job creation.

Elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, USAID will support the development of regional television programs designed to promote positive shifts in attitudes and behaviors related to women's participation in politics and governance.

Additionally, USAID supports efforts to build an international roster of experts in investigating and

prosecuting conflict-related sexual violence.

Looking ahead, USAID says it plans to expand successful programs that focus on women and peace and security, and to coordinate with host governments on advocacy for women's increased participation in high-level decision-making. It also aims to link protection and empowerment activities in crisis and conflict settings in ways that recognize women's and girls' diverse capabilities.

USAID says it will focus on women and girls in its efforts to combat illicit activities and gang violence, and increase its focus on women's engagement in economic recovery after conflict. The agency also says it will increase its efforts to engage men and boys in preventing violence and in championing women's and girls' social, political and economic empowerment.

U.S. Medical Research Accelerating Quest for HIV Cure

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 20 December 2013

Washington – A new year will begin at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) with an intensified focus on finding a cure for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

President Obama announced in early December that the agency should redirect \$100 million in funding to accelerate the search for a cure. HIV treatment has become very effective in controlling the virus in infected persons, but it never eradicates the virus completely, and it still has drawbacks.

The medications are very expensive, they can have serious side effects, and lifetime distribution to all persons around the world living with HIV/AIDS is an enormous challenge.

"It may not be feasible for tens of millions of people living with HIV infection to access and adhere to a lifetime of antiretroviral therapy," said NIAID's director, Dr. Anthony Fauci.

A cure has eluded medical science from the beginning of the pandemic, but more than 30 years of research have produced some promising avenues of investigation for a cure.

"The time is ripe to pursue HIV cure research with vigor," Fauci said at a World AIDS Day White House briefing December 2.

Jack Whitescarver, director of the Office of AIDS Research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), explained the future research will focus "specifically toward the goal of sustained or lifelong remission, in which patients control

or even eliminate HIV without the need for lifelong antiretroviral therapy.”

The search for a cure is targeting several different lines of inquiry. Developing a greater understanding of how the virus replicates itself while living inside a person, and how it progresses at the cellular level, is one way researchers want to better understand HIV.

Locating what researchers call the “reservoirs” of virus in the body is another goal for the near term. Treatment with antiretroviral medications (ARVs) continues for a lifetime because the virus returns if the medicine is stopped. The patient may have seemed clear of the virus while on ARV, but science has determined that HIV finds some place in the tissues to hide from the medication.

“So we need to study the nature of this particular reservoir of virus,” Fauci said in a radio interview, “and try to remove it either by a new class of drugs, by activating it or stimulating it to express itself so we can get rid of it.”

Further understanding of HIV reservoirs may lead to new ways to treat and prevent HIV. New research will also be directed to broadening knowledge of how HIV might be inhibited and how the immune response is activated.

The new funding investments will involve thousands of physicians and scientists at universities and biomedical centers, nationally and internationally, Fauci said. Study will also be directed toward understanding the interaction of aging and HIV infection, and what happens when HIV-induced immune dysfunction coexists with conditions of aging such as cardiovascular disease and frailty.

Finding a cure for HIV is among the greatest biomedical challenges of the age, but Fauci cautioned anyone from believing that a cure is close at hand. Science is an incremental process that relies on the peer review process to build knowledge over time to ultimately develop answers, he said. The \$100 million investment announced by the White House will help make progress toward a cure, but cannot guarantee it.

NIH’s director, Dr. Francis Collins, said that this new commitment to investment in AIDS research comes in the aftermath of a difficult period in the research community brought on by U.S. government budget difficulties. This investment marks a way forward.

“AIDS research is an example of an area where hard-won progress over many years has resulted in new and exciting possibilities in basic and clinical science in AIDS that must be pursued,” Collins said.

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