

A Very Special Class of Federal Employee

Item One on the Republican Contract With America—even before it got around to crime, welfare and cutting capital-gains taxes—was a pledge to subject Congress to the same laws and rules that apply to everyone else.

The pledge passed, amid much self-congratulation, on Day One of the first Republican-controlled House in 40 years. No longer would Congress be a privileged sanctuary, insulated from the burdens and petty harassments that government inflicts on the rest of the public.

Except that as you look at the federal government today, exactly one year later, it is shut down, with 780,000 federal employees either laid off or working for no pay.

And in this frozen wasteland of inactivity, amid the anguish of federal workers wondering how they will pay mortgages and heating bills, there still exists one insulated, privileged class of public servant: members of Congress, drawing their full paychecks even though they cannot or will not meet a payroll for rank-and-file federal employees.

Republicans argue that the pain of a shutdown is essential to force agreement on a balanced budget—but they carefully insulate themselves from that pain. In the two weeks the government has been closed, members of Congress have pulled in at least \$5,000 of their \$133,600 salary.

Three times the Senate has voted to cut off congressional pay if the

government shuts down, but the House Republican leaders who initiated the Contract With America won't hear of it. Meals on Wheels for the elderly, Medicare claims-processing, national parks and passport offices may not be essential, but congressional paychecks are.

With his regular paycheck coming in, Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) can smile, as he did on TV the other day, at how funny it is that all these federal workers are off the job and nobody misses them. Suppose we delay paying the federal matching funds to finance his stalled presidential campaign and see how long he smiles.

Some Republicans are serious about reforming Congress. Reps.

Mark Sanford of South Carolina and Wayne Allard of Colorado have introduced a bill that would put Congress on the same footing as most other Americans.

Their Citizen Congress Act abolishes the pension system that gives members of Congress guaranteed lifetime inflation-adjusted pensions that are far richer than most private-sector pension plans and more generous than pensions for ordinary federal employees.

Since so many of the Republicans want to privatize Social Security, let them start by entrusting their own retirement savings to a 28-year-old whiz kid in Singapore who has a hunch that Japanese interest rates will rise.

The Sanford-Allard bill also would end congressional franking privileges that enable members of Congress to fill your mailbox with postage-free propaganda in the guise of newsletters.

It would stop automatic pay raises, terminate special parking privileges at airports, take away frequent-flier miles accumulated on government-paid trips and bar congressional junketing on military aircraft.

(It took a protest by outraged State Department diplomats to shame dozens of representatives into canceling the traditional winter-break foreign shopping junkets they were planning to make while the government is shut down.)

And in a breathtaking triumph of principle, the Sanford-Allard bill would bar members of Congress from receiving free medical care at military facilities.

They already enjoy taxpayer-subsidized health insurance; let them use regular hospitals instead of the VIP sections at Bethesda Naval Hospital and Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Until this passes, these slash-the-government conservatives have it both ways: They can win elections by complaining that government is too big—and then pocket all the perks and paychecks that a big and generous government can bestow.