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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Government by Band-Aid

CONGRESS HAS decided to take the month off, mainly to campaign. You have to wonder at the decision, given the business that remains undone. It's not that the Republicans have been slacking off. The budget-balancing bill they sent the president included all kinds of major policy decisions—the bulk of their agenda, in fact—and he vetoed it, rightly in our view. But that would seem to be better argument for sticking around and continuing to try than for going home, particularly for going home empty-handed.

Much of the government is operating on a stopgap budget four months into the fiscal year. The Treasury secretary says he needs an increase in the debt ceiling or the government will shortly have to default; they could work on that. There needs to be a farm bill so that farmers and their bankers will know what the rules will be in the year ahead; they could work on that, too. They could work out the rules for environmental laws that remain on the books but for which enforcement funds have not been provided. They could figure out what they intend with regard to welfare reform, and what they want to do about the housing programs for the poor and telecom-

munications and immigration reform, all of which are also in limbo.

The farm bill is a particular problem. The existing programs are an anachronism that badly need sorting out. The budget-balancing bill would have begun to wean producers off them. The veto leaves a void because past spending authority has expired. Both houses had hoped to turn to the issue today, but it wasn't clear that both would be able to pass bills before the scheduled recess, much less get to conference. If they take the month off, how do they get an agreement among themselves as well as with the administration, which didn't like the phase-out of the existing programs that it was sent last year? At best they'll be doing it on the fly. What a slapdash way to do important business.

There isn't all that much time to legislate in presidential election years anyway. By shutting down for the entire month, it seems to us they complicate what was already a mess. Maybe they'll yet cut a deal with regard to the budget that will make it all worthwhile. The alternative seems to be a mostly wasted year in which little gets done and the government mainly limps along. What a come-down that would be.