

# The U.S. Congress in 1987: a year of lost opportunities

by Kathleen Klenetsky

The 100th Congress took office in the opening days of the Constitution's bicentennial year. But it proceeded to compile a record that defied the Founding Fathers on almost every count.

Faced with a host of challenges—the collapse of the economy, the spread of AIDS, the growing military power of the Soviet Union, etc.—Congress not only squandered a multitude of opportunities for positive contributions. It also took actions that drove the country deeper into depression, alienated key allies, exacerbated Western strategic vulnerability, and weakened the United States' basic constitutional framework.

The year began on a promising note, especially in the realm of economic policy. As a result of the Democrats' gaining control of the Senate via the November 1986 elections, a number of old-line, growth-oriented Democrats took control of several key committees, including Appropriations and Public Works.

Incoming House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) set what one hoped would become the policy thrust of the new Democratic Senate, in a speech to the Democratic Leadership Council shortly after the November elections. Wright warned that the United States was losing its industrial base so rapidly that it was reverting to the status of an undeveloped, colonial state. "Failure to deal with this crisis—to idle away precious time expecting it to correct itself—could doom future generations of Americans to a steadily declining standard of living. . . . I for one am not prepared to participate in the industrial and economic decline of this nation, nor to concede that our legacy must be confined to that of a service economy which produces little."

## Succumbing to Wall Street

But, as it turned out, participate in the industrial and economic decline of the country was precisely what Wright, and the vast majority of his colleagues, proceeded to do. After racking up several significant accomplishments during the first months of the year—notably, overriding President Reagan's veto of the Clean Water Act, which allocated \$19 billion in vitally needed funds for sewage and water projects—Congress abdicated the responsibility as defined by Wright to formulate an economic recovery program, and instead succumbed to Wall Street's push for trade war and

drastic budget cuts.

In a move that epitomized its follies on economic policy, the Congress in September reinstated the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings automatic sequestration provision, after it had been declared unconstitutional by the courts. A month later, the stock market crashed, and Congress responded by joining the administration in a "budget summit." Operating under pressure from Wall Street, which was demanding huge spending cuts, and the Nov. 20 deadline for the automatic sequestration, the budget summiteers produced a two-year, \$76 billion "deficit reduction" package, which included additional cuts in military spending, Medicare (a \$4 billion cut during the first year), farm price supports, and other automatic benefit programs—and a substantial tax hike.

Nothing in the budget agreement addressed the fundamental problem of the economy: the deliberate abandonment of basic manufacturing and agriculture, for the sake of the mythical benefits of the "post-industrial age." A few members of Congress tried to raise this basic issue, such as Sen. John Melcher, who blasted the "post-industrial drift" of the economy, and warned that "the strength of basic industries forms the base of the U.S. economy. . . . Ignoring them is perilous."

But Melcher's was a voice in the wilderness of congressional cowardice and stupidity.

The same refusal to deal with fundamental economic problems characterized congressional action in the key area of international trade. Rather than fight the ways to alleviate the global debt burden—a prerequisite for expanding global trade—Congress instead sought to punish America's allies for the mess caused by America's own economic blunders. Both houses of Congress passed trade bills dominated by punitive actions against other nations, and final legislation was expected to be approved shortly after Congress returns from its Christmas recess.

In this climate, it was not surprising that proposals for a balanced-budget amendment, line-item veto, and related schemes which would undercut the constitutional structure of government, began to pick up far more support than in the past.

## Strategic rout

National security was one of the major victims of

congressional inaction on the economy. Although the Reagan administration submitted a bare-bones defense budget, Congress insisted on cutting that by nearly \$20 billion. Defense outlays for FY 1988 will be in the area of \$292 billion. Far deeper reductions are expected.

The Strategic Defense Initiative once again suffered huge cuts. Despite Mikhail Gorbachov's public confirmation that the Soviet Union has indeed been conducting its own strategic defense program, Congress allocated a mere \$3.9 billion to the U.S. project—more than \$2 billion less than the administration requested.

Congress's hacking away at defense merely continued the trends of the last four years. But this time, something new was added, as legislators decided to take their assault on national security to new levels, by arrogating to themselves the "right" to dictate policy on arms control. Led by Senate Armed Services Committee chairman Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), the arms-control mafia on the Hill fought tooth and nail to constrain the SDI within the so-called "narrow reading" of the ABM Treaty. In March, Nunn went on a rampage, vowing to cause a "constitutional crisis" if the administration dared break with the restrictive interpretation insisted upon by Moscow.

Nunn's violent outburst came in response to testimony which Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger had presented to the Armed Services Committee on Feb. 17, in which he predicted that a shift to formal adoption of the "broad interpretation" (which would permit unfettered research, testing, and deployment of an advanced SDI) was "coming very soon." The SDI had made such great strides that "we could be at the point where some of the experiments that we can and should do, require a broader interpretation," Weinberger told the panel, adding that he expected Reagan to make a decision on whether the United States would go ahead with tests under the broad interpretation "in the next few months."

Under Nunn's leadership, both the House and Senate added amendments to the FY 1988 Defense authorization bill to institutionalize the "narrow reading"; and to force continued compliance with the unratified SALT II Treaty. Although the President repeatedly vowed that he would not accept these provisions, arguing, correctly, that Congress did not have constitutional sanction to make such decisions, Congress eventually triumphed. Incoming Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci struck a rotten compromise with Congress, under which SDI funds for FY 88 could only be used for tests consistent with the restrictive interpretation. In addition, although the administration refused to abide by SALT II sublimits, it did agree to retire a Poseidon submarine whose deployment surpassed those limits. The compromise also extended a near-total ban on ASAT (anti-satellite) tests.

Congress took the same hard-ball approach to the U.S. deployment in the Persian Gulf, attempting to force the invocation of the War Powers Act, in order to keep the Persian Gulf free for Khomeini's terrorists. Opposition to the deployment crescendoed Aug. 5, when 100 Democratic members

of Congress, led by Rep. Mike Lowry (D-Wash.) filed a suit in U.S. federal district court demanding that Reagan be forced to invoke the act, as authority for sending U.S. military forces to patrol the Persian Gulf. The suit is still in the courts.

On the Senate side, Majority Leader Robert Byrd (D-W. Va.) teamed up with Sam Nunn and liberal Republicans like Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) to try to force an end to the deployment. As *EIR* goes to press, the Senate has not been successful, but the issue is still very much alive.

Congress played an equally unsavory role in other important areas of strategic and foreign policy, applying the Philippines treatment developed by the National Endowment for Democracy's "Project Democracy," to Panama and Haiti. In line with this, Congress sabotaged its vaunted probe of the Iran-Contra scandal, in order to keep the NED apparatus intact.

### **AIDS: a few small steps**

Though the vast majority of congressmen and senators continued to hide behind the Centers for Disease Control's line on AIDS, there were actually a few glimmers of sanity on the issue. On Jan. 7, Rep. William Dannemeyer (R-Calif.), a supporter of the California AIDS ballot initiative, Proposition 64, introduced an omnibus package of legislation to stop the spread of the deadly virus. Condemning the U.S. Public Health Service and state medical authorities for their "failure to act," Dannemeyer said his legislation was required to fill "a dangerous void in public-health policies and protections." The congressman said that the "linchpin" of his legislation was criminal penalties for those who carry the virus and "purposefully engage in activities considered high-risk, for purposes of transmission."

Congress did not adopt the Dannemeyer package; but did vote in favor of more limited measures, among them, proposals for mandatory testing of immigrants, and an amendment, sponsored by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), to prevent government funds from being used to promote homosexual behavior. The move in the direction of a saner AIDS policy got a major boost Oct. 15, when Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.) warned his colleagues that if the United States failed to adopt a comprehensive mandatory testing program, 25 million Americans could be dead of the disease by the year 2005. Burton based his prediction on a new study conducted by Dr. Allan Salzberg, chief of medical services at the Veterans Administration in Miles City, Montana, which he sent to every office on the Hill.

### **Another chance?**

Despite this miserable record, Congress can redeem itself when it reconvenes in mid-January. The most important issue on the agenda will be ratification of the INF Treaty. With an estimated 25 or so hard-core opponents of the pact, and another 25 undecided, it is entirely possible that the sell-out agreement could be defeated. But that will require the kind of political courage that was so lacking in 1987.