

Et Tu, Congress?

DURING the last week of April, the Federal Aviation Administration began furloughing air traffic controllers. The FAA made the high-profile cost-saving move to stay under the budget limits imposed by sequestration.

The number of takeoffs and departures from the nation's airports was therefore limited, and flight delays predictably followed. It was as if a moderate winter storm had snarled flight schedules, but these delays were man-made and avoidable.

The normally placid flying public—which regularly subjects itself to all manner of inconvenience and indignity for the privilege of traveling by air—demanded action. When this group of relatively wealthy and well-connected travelers asked Congress to jump, lawmakers asked, “How high?”

Within a week, Congress passed legislation to enable the FAA to end its furloughs and consequently end the delays. President Obama signed the legislation into law May 1st, and the delays were gone almost as quickly as they began.

This episode proved two things.

First, contrary to its reputation, Congress can indeed act quickly to get things done.

Second, Congress' priorities are all wrong.

The air traffic controller furloughs had exactly the effect that sequestration was supposed to cause. When the Budget Control Act of 2011 was passed nearly two years ago, sequestration was designed as the stick to compel Congress to come to a budget agreement. Sequestration was going to be so arbitrary, and so horrible, that lawmakers would have no choice but to prevent it.

Instead, what we now have is a Congress willing to make exceptions to the law, diluting sequestration's short-term effects and inconveniences without fixing the underlying problem. This is not a good thing. Every exception increases the likelihood Congress will come to view sequestration as an acceptable status quo.

Sequestration does not end with the FAA, of course. By mid-May, the Pentagon was implementing draconian and arbitrary cuts to its programs. The dam-

age got progressively worse with each passing day as Air Force and Defense Department training, maintenance, and readiness fell further and further below acceptable levels.

At the time of this writing, more than a month had passed since the Air Force began grounding more than a dozen front-line fighter and bomber units as a desperate cost-saving measure. Large-scale training exercises such as Red Flag, which prepare airmen for upcoming missions, were shuttered.

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“These actions severely degrade Air Force readiness,” USAF Secretary Michael B. Donley and Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III told lawmakers May 9th. “Lost flight hours ... result in severe, rapid, and long-term unit combat readiness degradation. We have already ceased operations for one-third of our fighter and bomber forces. Within 60 days of a stand-down, the affected units will be unable to meet the emergent or operations plans requirements.”

The Air Force has preserved training and operational funding for deployment prep, such as for the Angel Thunder combat search and rescue exercise for units preparing to head overseas. But under sequestration, the ability to address an unexpected crisis is going out the window, and the nation's ability to provide trained follow-on forces is quickly withering.

As sequestration progresses, “we won't have forces that are adequately ready and will either have to make the choice to deploy with less-trained forces or take extra time to get them ready,” Pentagon comptroller Robert F. Hale recently said.

This approach may have worked for the United States, just barely, for World War I—but today and in the future the nation will not have the luxury of declaring war, mobilizing, and then going off to fight. The strength and speed of the Air Force has been one of the United States' key military advantages. For decades, airpower has stood ready to quickly respond, worldwide, to any

need from humanitarian relief to full-fledged war.

“Allowing the Air Force to slip to a lower state of readiness that requires a subsequent long buildup to full combat effectiveness will negate the essential strategic advantages of airpower and put joint forces at increased risk,” warned Donley and Welsh in their prepared testimony last month.

This plea that Congress not send the Air Force into a tiered readiness status, limiting the nation's military options, was essentially met by the sound of crickets.

Training, maintenance, and readiness shortfalls are growing, and they become more difficult to repair the longer the sequester continues.

This is not just an Air Force problem. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno recently told defense reporters some 80 percent of the Army is now limited to small-unit training—but when he met with congressmen, “they told me, ‘I haven't gotten a single call from a constituent about defense.’”

Meanwhile, the Navy has idled ships, and DOD announced on May 14 that 680,000 civilian employees will be forced to take an unpaid day off for 11 straight weeks.

That's right, they're being furloughed.

Referring to Congress' recent action ending the FAA furloughs without solving the underlying budget problem, Rep. Rick Larsen (D-Wash.), said, “This lands somewhere short of a profile in courage,” adding, “Congress created this problem. We need to fix it.”

Yes, and before even more damage is done. What Congress needs to do—now—is reach an agreement to meet the Budget Control Act's requirements. Until that happens, Band-Aid “fixes” are only hiding sequestration's accumulating damage.

Through its inaction, Congress has turned its back on the military's needs while the nation is at war. It has not even allowed DOD to properly posture itself for smaller future budgets.

People can easily lose track of what “risk” means for the nation. Sometimes it is flight delays, but for the military it means more. “What is the risk?” Odierno asked in his meeting with defense reporters. “The risk is lives.” ■