

Media – How a 141-year-old rule could revolutionize the budget process (The Hill) May 8, 2013

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## **How A 141-Year-Old Rule Could Revolutionize the Budget Process**

By Neil Siefring, Opinion Contributor - 05/17/17

In the next few weeks the House of Representatives will start considering the 12 annual appropriations bills. The process is usually time consuming, messy, and controversial, just as the Founding Fathers intended it to be. This time, a rule dating from our country's centennial will have a privileged position for the debates. And it may revolutionize the appropriations process.

In 1876, Rep. William Holman (D-Ind.) was able to include language in the rules of the House to reduce the pay or number of federal employees on appropriations bills. The interpretation of the rule and its use has been modified over the years, and starting in 1983 the rule was weakened. A basic understanding of the rule is that it “empowers any member of Congress to propose amending an appropriations bill to single out a government employee or cut a specific program.”

The House of Representatives has revived the Holman rule as part of the House rules package for the first year only of the current two-year session of Congress. Rep. Morgan Griffith (R-Va.) was a leader in getting the rule included as part of the House rules. The Holman rule will allow members of the House to get at the spending spree by the federal government that lies at the heart of the nearly \$20 trillion federal debt and the supersized federal government. Members will now have the chance to reduce the size of the federal government and restore the concept of a limited federal government for which we fought a revolution against the British.

When drafting the Constitution, the Founders intentionally created a federal government of limited powers in order to preserve the prerogatives of the people and the states. The concept behind the Constitution was best summed up by the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, who said, “The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do, for

themselves, in their separate and individual capacities. In all that the people can individually do as well or themselves, government ought not to interfere.”

Over time, the federal government has gained far more power than the Founders intended for it to have. For decades, lawmakers from the right and the left have found creative ways to sidestep the wise impediments put in the way of giving the federal government too much power. Wielding this power costs money, and the taxpayers foot the bill and feel the frustration of living under the bloated and often bullying array of federal departments and agencies.

These entities have their own constituencies: lawmakers in the House and Senate who oversee them and depend on their existence for their power, states who have become dependent on them for funding, and down chain suppliers who sell equipment and expertise to keep the bureaucratic behemoth functioning.

The appropriations process has, thus far, been largely ineffective in rolling back the size of the federal government. There have been minor victories with small cuts, but the spending keeps up at an irresponsible rate. The reinstatement of the Holman rule can make a difference. It will empower members of the House to bring up spending cuts to appropriations bills that can cut the salaries and number of federal employees and begin the long journey to scaling the scope of the federal government closer to the vision of the Founders.

The extent to which the federal bureaucracy is entrenched and our constitutional inheritance has been forgotten is evidenced by the negative headlines that greeted the return of the Holman rule. “New house GOP rule lets lawmakers fire individual federal workers,” reported one news outlet. “Blast from the past: House reinstates rule targeting agency spending, employee salaries,” reported another. There is a misplaced sense that eliminating federal jobs along with department and agency functions is inherently bad.

It is not. Doing so shows that the legislative process is healthy and responsive to the over spending and over governing that has occurred for too long. Once the federal government creates a job, it should never eliminate it, so the thinking goes. That misguided perspective is part of the problem: Congress can indeed review the bureaucracy and scale it back, just as it ramped it up. As history and experience have shown, the bureaucracy needs to be shrunk. And

that means the size of the federal workforce needs to be reduced.

There is work being done by the federal government and its employees that simply is not supposed to be done by the federal government and is meant to be done by the states. Inertia within Congress and the executive branch makes reducing the scope of federal activity difficult. The Holman rule will make it easier by allowing lawmakers to bring their proposals to the House floor as part of debate on spending bills and get a vote on their proposed cuts.

If the establishment will not make the cuts necessary to the federal government and return power to the people, then the Holman rule can be used to help reduce the resources used to accomplish the goal. Using the Holman rule to reclaim control over a government that has exceeded its boundaries is brave, principled, and honors the concept of a republican form of government. The rule dates from 1876, but the spirit behind it is pure 1776.

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