

## Congress Consults With Constituents

Edward D. Duvall  
22 Apr 2011

An interesting story by Nancy Cordes at CBS News called "Is Anyone in Washington Minding the Store?" (see <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/04/22/eveningnews/main20056610.shtml?tag=stack>) reveals that Congress has chosen to take a two-week vacation. In doing so, they are deferring several important issues, especially the federal budget. But, as Ms. Cordes notes at the end of her column, the Members of Congress regard this time away from Washington essential to their duties because it gives them the opportunity to "spend more time in their home districts."

I hope they are not spending too much time back home discussing local issues, when the main focus of Congress should be on national issues. I would think that each Member of Congress knows the sentiments of the people of his state or district fairly well by now -- they were elected by those same people, weren't they? If they don't know them by now, maybe Congress should only be in session for a few months out of the year, so the Members can spend time actually living in their districts. It seems Congress has gradually drifted toward the federalization of local issues as expressed in the federal budget rather than concentrating its efforts where they belong, on the truly national issues. In order to pass legislation that is beneficial for the entire nation, the Members of Congress would do well to become familiar with how that legislation would affect all the states, not just their own. The power to enact a budget naturally depends on the power to tax; the power to tax is most wisely used by those who have a general sense of the conditions in all the states. As Hamilton pointed out in *The Federalist* #35:

"There is no part of the administration of government that requires extensive information and a thorough knowledge of the principles of political economy, so much as the business of taxation. The man who understands those principles best will be least likely to resort to oppressive expedients, or to sacrifice any particular class of citizens to the procurement of revenue. It might be demonstrated that the most productive system of finance will always be the least burdensome. There can be no doubt that in order to obtain a judicious exercise of the power of taxation, it is necessary that the person in whose hands it is should be acquainted with the general genius of the people at large, and with the resources of the country."

Madison continued this line of reasoning in *The Federalist* #57:

"The attentive reader will discern that the reasoning here used, to prove the sufficiency of a moderate number of representatives, does not in any respect contradict what was urged on another occasion with regard to the extensive information which the representatives ought to possess, and the time that might be necessary for acquiring it. This information, so far as it may relate to local objects, is rendered necessary and difficult, not by a difference of laws and local circumstances within a single State, but of those among different States. Taking each State by itself, its laws are the same, and its interests but little diversified. A few men, therefore, will possess all the knowledge requisite for a proper representation of them. Were the interests and affairs of each individual State perfectly simple and uniform, a knowledge of them in one part would involve a knowledge of them in every other, and the whole State might be competently represented by a single member taken from any part of it. On a comparison of the different States together, we find a great dissimilarity in their laws, and in many other circumstances connected with the objects of federal legislation, with all of which the federal representatives ought to have some acquaintance. Whilst a few representatives, therefore, from each State may bring with them a due knowledge of their own State, every representative will have much information to acquire concerning all the States."

But our Members of Congress prefer to focus on local issues, to ensure that those are given preferential treatment as best as possible in federal legislation. It is much to be preferred that Congress concentrate its energies on the few things it ought to be doing, that is, develop policies at the national level, consistent with the best interests of the nation as a whole.