

Shooting the Messenger: Congress Targets the Taxpayers' Watchdog



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“Most people and actors appearing on the stage have some writer to write their material. Congress is good enough for me. They have been writing my material for years.”

- Will Rogers

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I. Introduction

Despite repeated attempts to reach a deal on deficit reduction, there are few solutions Republicans and Democrats have been willing to agree to. The failure to reign in our nation's uncontrollable borrowing and spending has resulted in the first ever downgrade of our nation's finances. We are in desperate and urgent need for solutions acceptable to both sides of the aisle if we hope to avoid even greater financial and economic threats. While neither party has been able to produce a compromise plan, we are fortunate to be provided unbiased blue prints that could form a solution from one well-respected, non-partisan agency, the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

Just this year GAO identified hundreds of billions of dollars of duplicative and overlapping programs that, if addressed by Congress, could both save money and improve services for taxpayers. Yet, instead of adopting these good government reforms, the Senate Appropriations Committee has responded by proposing dramatic budget cuts to the GAO budget.

There is no question every government program and agency, including GAO, must be thoroughly examined for savings to address our unprecedented fiscal challenges. The irony is Congress needs GAO's assistance now more than ever. If the mission of GAO is compromised by excessive cuts, where else can Congress turn to find unbiased data to improve programs and save money?

Quite frankly, the reason the guidance of GAO is so important at this time is because Congress has increasingly ignored its own duties to oversee the functions of government. Even with a shrinking budget, GAO has continued to produce nearly 1,000 reports a year recommending billions of dollars in savings. By way of comparison, there has been a precipitous decline in congressional hearings despite steady spending increases for both the House of Representatives and the Senate. And as the overall federal budget increased 100 percent between 1992 and 2007, GAO's budget was slashed by more than 20 percent.

For every \$1 spent on GAO, the agency provides \$90 in savings recommendations. No other government agency can make such a claim. And in this era of trillion dollar deficits, Congress desperately needs this rate of return to get us out of the fiscal mess that we have created and so far have demonstrated little ability or willingness to solve.

Congress should first cut spending where it is unnecessary, unused, or mismanaged. We can start with more dramatic cuts in our own office budgets. Half of the Senate's committees have held fewer hearings this year and one committee has yet to hold a single hearing. Likewise, the Senate has voted on fewer amendments to bills this year and has passed very few bills that have been signed into law. More than 100 presidential nominees have lagged in committees, awaiting hearings and confirmation.

All in all, Congress is doing less at a time when our nation desperately needs vibrant leadership. It should come as no surprise then that congressional approval ratings have dropped to 9 percent, the lowest level ever recorded. Americans are growingly concerned our debt which will soon top \$15 trillion imperils our economic recovery, our national security, and the future of the American Dream.

Congress has proved incapable of finding answers to the debt crisis and now it is threatening to muzzle those who can. It has failed to pass a budget. It has ignored the recommendations of the president's deficit commission, and now it is considering cuts that could very well hobble the one agency that members of both parties have long trusted for thoughtful recommendations. There is no

question savings can be found within every agency and program, but without the guidance of GAO it is far less likely these savings will be identified. Until Congress begins to responsibly carry out its constitutional duties of overseeing the functions of the federal government and responsibly managing the federal purse strings, it should further reduce its own budget rather than that of GAO so the agency can continue to find answers to our nation's fiscal problems that Congress has failed to do.

This report outlines how GAO continues to do more with less while Congress is doing less with more and demonstrates the cuts proposed by the House and Senate are misdirected and should be rejected.

2. Congress Relies Heavily on GAO to Conduct Oversight

A brief analysis of the work GAO has done in recent years shows how heavily Congress has come to rely on the agency for oversight. Thousands of times a year, GAO releases reports, testifies at hearings and issues recommendations which serve as the basis for congressional oversight and legislation. With few exceptions, GAO has produced an average of more than 1,000 oversight reports for Congress each year since 2000.

Every committee relies on GAO, as does most every subcommittee. According to Comptroller General Gene Dodaro:

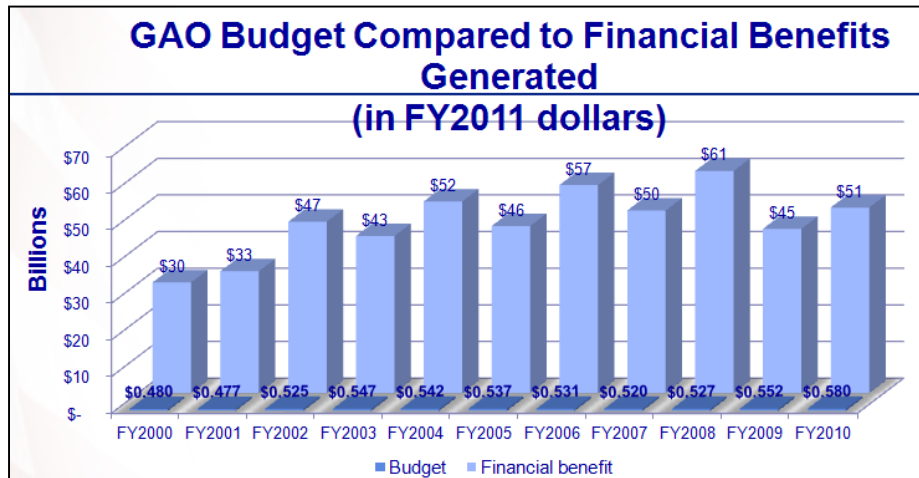
“GAO serves every standing committee of the Congress, and, in recent years, 70 percent of the subcommittees have submitted requests. ... We have more requests for our services than we can get to in a timely manner, but we work with requesters to address their highest priorities.”¹

a. GAO Saves Billions for the Taxpayer

In a typical year, GAO helps the government achieve nearly \$90 in savings for every \$1 spent on its budget. In an appearance before Congress earlier this year, Dodaro explained:

“On return on investment, as you mentioned, Mr. Chairman, we returned last year \$87 for every dollar spent on GAO in financial benefits, in terms of cost savings or opportunities to gain revenues or better use of Federal resources. Actually, our rolling 4-year average has been \$94 to \$1.”²

The following chart shows a steady increase in the value GAO has provided the taxpayer.



Source: GAO

¹ Hearing of the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Legislative Branch, “Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012,” Part 2, March 11, 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hrg65845/pdf/CHRG-112hrg65845.pdf>.

² Hearing of the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Legislative Branch, “Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012,” Part 2, March 11, 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hrg65845/pdf/CHRG-112hrg65845.pdf>.

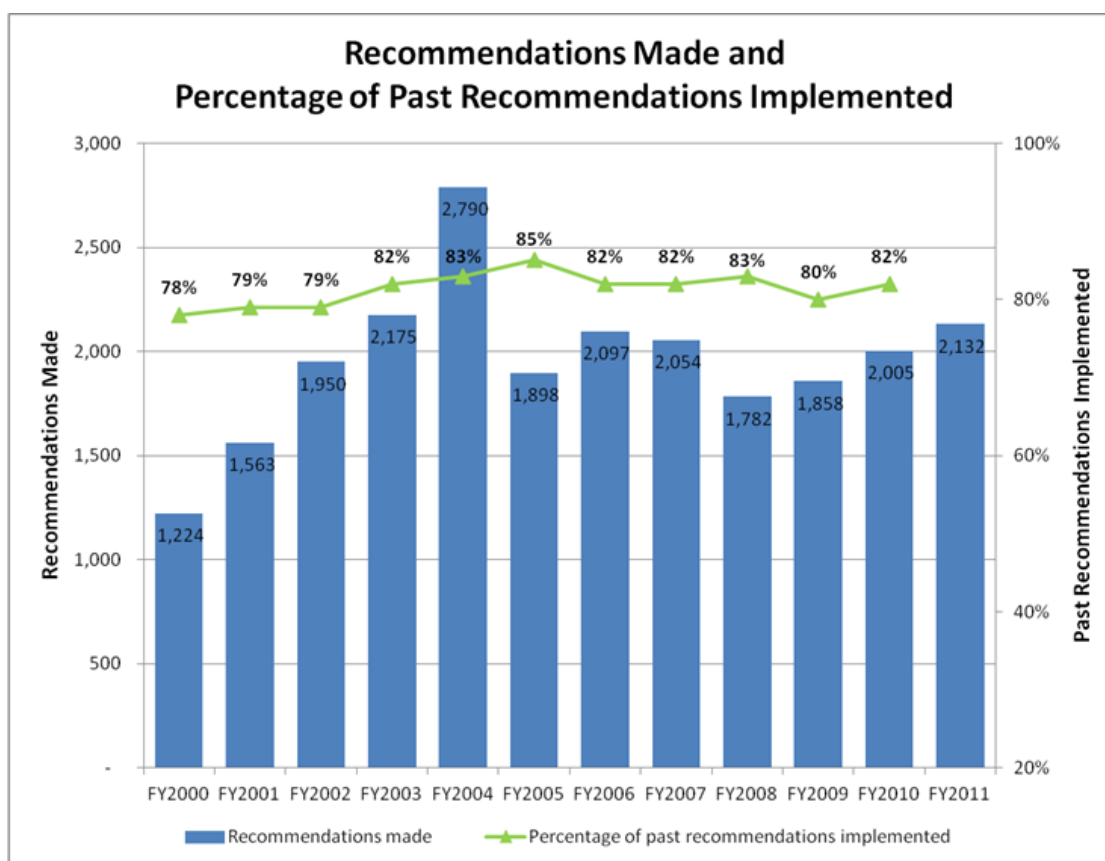
Over the last ten years, the return on investment for GAO audits and investigations has gone up. In 2008, the highest level of return over the past decade, GAO used its \$527 million budget to help the government achieve \$61 billion in financial benefits, adjusted for inflation.



For every dollar it is budgeted, GAO identifies \$90 in savings.

As we seek solutions to our nation's fiscal crisis, GAO's nonpartisan expertise has never been more valuable. In fiscal year 2009, GAO documented about \$43 billion in financial benefits, in non-inflation adjusted dollars—a return of \$80 for every dollar spent by GAO. The \$41.7 million cut to GAO's budget could, therefore, result in \$3.3 billion in federal funds that will be lost to waste, fraud, abuse, and inefficiency.

While GAO must face the same fiscal realities being applied to every other federal agency and program, the cut to the agency's budget represents more than ten percent of the entire reduction proposed within legislative branch spending, measured in total dollars cut.³



Source: GAO

³ FY2011 funding in the Legislative Branch Appropriations bill was \$4.54 billion; proposed funding for FY2012, as reported by the Senate Appropriations Committee is \$4.19 billion, amounting to a reduction of \$353.6 million. Proposed reductions for GAO's budget range from \$34.96 million (House) to \$41.73 million (Senate).

GAO also offers recommendations for improving federal programs. Its thousands of recommendations are made with a careful eye toward increasing the efficient management of programs and not unduly to influence policy preferences. As such, they give Congress a solid measure by which to hold agencies accountable for progress. Testifying to the careful way in which GAO issues recommendations, agencies implement the recommendations more than 80 percent of the time.

As the above chart shows, GAO has increased the number of recommendations it released in each of the last four years. As they were implemented, the savings for taxpayers were enormous.

b. GAO's Work is in High Demand from Congress

The demand for GAO's work is well attested. Requests for GAO audits and investigations pile up rapidly, at a rate of approximately four every business day. These official requests and legislative mandates do not count the hundreds of other briefings and requests to GAO for technical assistance.

On average, we receive between 900 and 1,000 requests a year from Congress. We work to prioritize those. Once we have our budget for this year, we will be able to size our staffing levels appropriately.⁴

Since 2001, GAO has received 10,477 requests from Congress as well as another 1,198 "mandates" for work required by law. This amounts to 11,675—or more than 1,000 a year over the past decade.

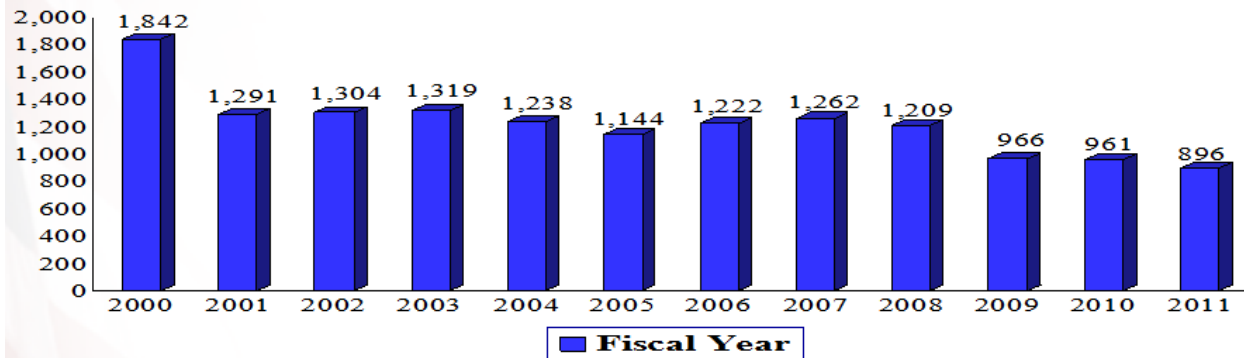
Fiscal Year	Congressional Mandates	Congressional Requests
2001	102	994
2002	72	950
2003	95	1,016
2004	110	1,008
2005	109	918
2006	82	982
2007	75	1,136
2008	160	1,046
2009	131	793
2010	173	801
2011	89	833
TOTAL	1,198	10,477

Source: GAO

⁴ Hearing of the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Legislative Branch, "Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012," Part 2, March 11, 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hrg65845/pdf/CHRG-112hrg65845.pdf>.

Despite this workload, GAO continues to produce a high volume of oversight material for Congress. Even in the face of a declining budget and reduced personnel, GAO has continued to produce nearly 1,000 reports every year, frequently more. In 2006 and 2007, for example, both years in which GAO saw its budget decline, the number of reports issued increased each year.

Reports issued FY 2000 – 2011



Source: GAO

The reduction in reports issued in recent years may be most related to the decrease in requests from Congress. In 2011, GAO did some of its best work. Earlier this year, GAO released a landmark report helping to identify 81 areas of possible duplication and overlap within the federal government.⁵ This one report alone, coming in at 345 pages and resulting from the effort of dozens of GAO employees, shed light on possible savings worth hundreds of billions that both parties have readily agreed should be enacted.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid praised the report, saying “[The GAO report] shows all kinds of redundancies and overlapping. Those are places we can cut money. Let’s do it.”⁶ House Democratic



Leader Nancy Pelosi likewise called the report a “blueprint” to get rid of waste, fraud, abuse, duplication, obsolescence, and the rest.”⁷ Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s office called the report “a big deal” while Senator Jeanne Shaheen said the “GAO report shows us a path forward to responsibly, effectively reduce the deficit.”⁸

⁵ Government Accountability Office, “Opportunities to Reduce Potential Duplication in Government Programs, Save Tax Dollars, and Enhance Revenue,” March 2011, GAO-11-318SP, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d11318sp.pdf>.

⁶ Congressional Record, March 4, 2011, Senate, S1249, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2011-03-04/pdf/CREC-2011-03-04-pt1-PgS1247-2.pdf#page=3>.

⁷ Website of Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, Press Release, “Pelosi Floor Speech on Short-Term Continuing Resolution,” March 15, 2011, <http://pelosi.house.gov/news/press-releases/2011/03/pelosi-floor-speech-on-short-term-continuing-resolution.shtml>.

⁸ Wong, Scott, “Republicans latch onto GAO spending report,” *Politico*, March 1, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/50429.html>.

More recently, GAO conducted groundbreaking oversight of the Federal Reserve System, uncovering conflicts-of-interest that were never before widely known or understood.⁹ The report showed that its board consisted of the same top bank executives that were benefiting from tens of billions of dollars in assistance. Under law, GAO's access to Federal Reserve information has long been strictly limited to management decisions rather than policy ones, cloaking the Fed in a level of secrecy unknown to other agencies.¹⁰

More than just issuing reports, though, GAO experts regularly testify in front of congressional committees, averaging more appearances than there are days Congress is in session. Over the past five years, GAO experts have averaged nearly 225 appearances each year before Congress. And in 2008, the agency supplied witnesses nearly 300 times.

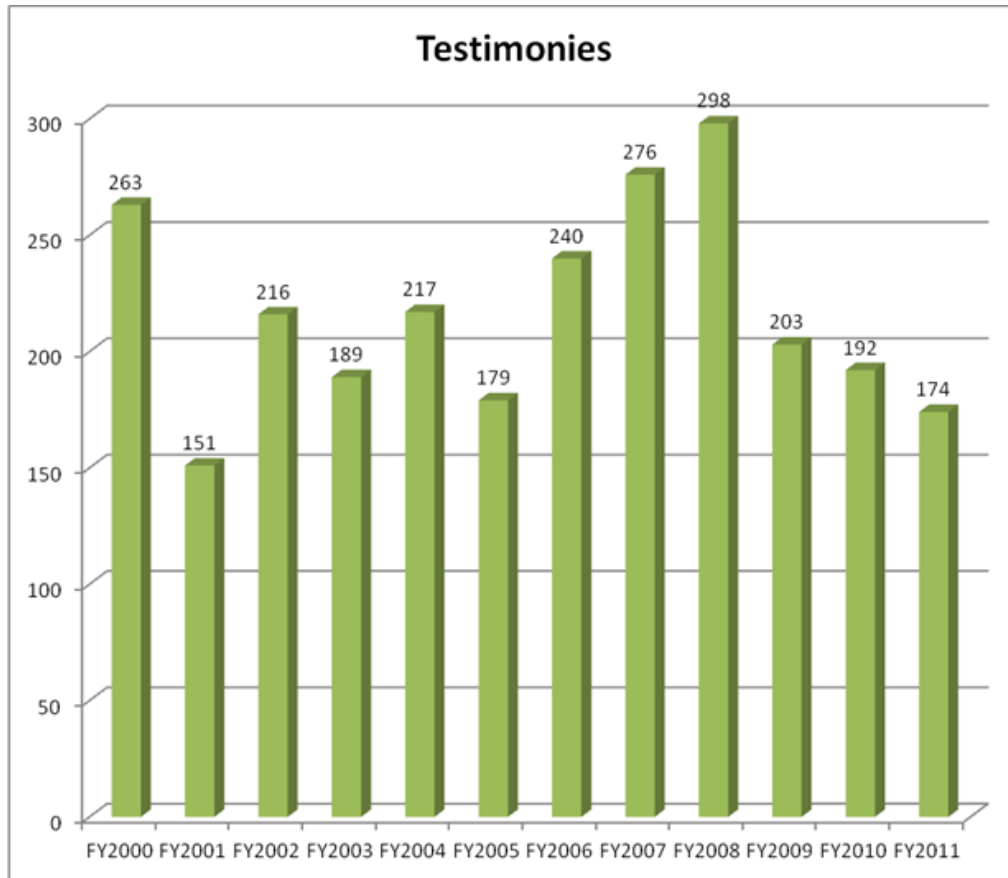
In the build up to the 2010 Census, GAO investigators released several reports and testified before Congress numerous times. Perhaps GAO's most important discovery was a fatal flaw with hand-held computer technology the Census Bureau planned to implement as a cost-saving measure. GAO flagged the problem years in advance,¹¹ resulting in a massive re-engineering of the Census and the retirement of top officials responsible for the original problems.¹² Without GAO's significant involvement, billions more would likely have been wasted and the entire decennial census put at risk.

⁹ Government Accountability Office, "Federal Reserve Bank Governance: Opportunities Exist to Broaden Director Recruitment Efforts and Increase Transparency," October 2011, GAO-12-18, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d1218.pdf>.

¹⁰ Website of the Governors of the Federal Reserve System, "Oversight of the Federal Reserve System," (accessed November 1, 2011), http://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/bst_oversight.htm.

¹¹ Government Accountability Office, "Census Bureau's Decision to Continue with Handheld Computers for Address Canvassing Makes Planning and Testing Critical," March 2008, GAO-08-936, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08936.pdf>; Government Accountability Office, "Information Technology: Significant Problems of Critical Automation Program Contribute to Risks Facing 2010 Census," March 5, 2008, GAO-08-550T, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08550t.pdf>.

¹² El Nasser, Haya, "For 2010 Census, counting gets tougher," *USA Today*, October 8, 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/2008-10-08-Census_N.htm.



Source: GAO

c. *Bipartisan Praise for GAO*

Members of Congress from both parties recognize the contribution of GAO, and through the years have praise for the work it performs. Even as the Senate Appropriations Committee voted to cut GAO by historic amounts, it still praised the agency and noted its massive workload:

“The Committee commends the GAO for its efficiency in providing assistance to every standing congressional committee and over 70 percent of their subcommittees in the past year. The Committee further notes that the number of legislatively mandated studies requested by the Congress increased by over 30 percent from fiscal year 2010 to fiscal year 2011.”¹³

Likewise the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, Ander Crenshaw, told the Comptroller General at a March 2011 hearing that GAO would become more important because of the current fiscal crisis. He noted: “And in the

¹³ Senate Committee on Appropriations, Senate Report 112-80, Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&dbname=cp112&sid=cp112zK7Qv&refer=&n=sr080.112&item=&&&sel=TOC.151798&>.

atmosphere in which we are operating today, your corner of the world becomes even more important. We thank you for the work that you do.”¹⁴

Senator Joseph Lieberman, who chairs the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, called GAO “an agency whose fact-based audits and investigations deeply inform our work.”¹⁵ Senator Susan Collins, the committee’s ranking member, noted its reputation as “the American taxpayers’ best friend” and called GAO “an unabashed advocate for the public and a protective steward of federal resources.”¹⁶

Senator Daniel Akaka, chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia, noted that the agency’s biannual High-Risk List, which identifies the most troubled government programs, was “a valuable oversight tool, especially for my subcommittee’s work to improve government management.”¹⁷

d. Budget Cuts Will Reduce GAO’s Ability to Conduct Effective Oversight

Despite the benefits of GAO, it is still facing steeper budget cuts than congressional offices and some other Legislative Branch agencies. Unfortunately, these cuts will not come without impact. The price will be a reduction in oversight commensurate with the depth of the cuts.

Even the appropriations committees, which have proposed these budget reductions, agree and have made that point publicly. In the Senate, the Appropriations Committee left GAO with the following:

Given the current fiscal constraints of this budget, it is evident that many of the services provided by the GAO will be curtailed due to reductions in staff and resources. The Committee recognizes that its recommendation will require the GAO to implement severe measures including a significant and historic reduction in staff to below 3,000 FTEs, through a hiring freeze, attrition and early retirement.¹⁸

Ironically, in the same paragraph the committee gave GAO a new assignment: to add a productivity-crippling “cost analysis to every report” detailing the process for completing the report.

¹⁴ Hearing of the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Legislative Branch, “Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012,” Part 2, March 11, 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg65845/pdf/CHRG-112hhrg65845.pdf>.

¹⁵ Reilly, Sean, “Senate panel approves Dodaro nomination,” *Federal Times* (FedLine blog), November 30, 2010, <http://blogs.federaltimes.com/federal-times-blog/2010/11/30/senate-panel-approves-dodaro-nomination/>.

¹⁶ Website of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Press Release, “Senate Confirms Gene Dodaro To Head GAO,” December 22, 2010, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Press.MajorityNews&ContentRecord_id=10c54c74-5056-8059-768d-a39ca719af20.

¹⁷ Website of Senator Daniel Akaka, “Akaka reacts to 2011 GAO High Risk List,” February 16, 2011, <http://akaka.senate.gov/press-releases.cfm?method=releases.view&id=3f15e699-67e4-49b4-85b8-1c5e26d16559>.

¹⁸ Senate Committee on Appropriations, Senate Report 112-80, Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012, http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&dbname=cpl12&sid=cpl12zK7Qv&refer=&r_n=sr080.112&item=&&&sel=TOC.151798&.

In order to better understand the extensive amount of work that goes into producing reports and audits for Congress, the Committee directs the GAO to add a cost analysis to every report requested by a member or a committee including but not limited to the number FTEs that were associated with the production of the report, the number of hours required to produce the report, associated travel expenses, and the number of reports previously conducted on the particular issue.¹⁹

In the House of Representatives, the Appropriations Committee noted that members of Congress could expect significant delays in their wait for oversight products.

The Committee fully understands that these reductions will require adjustments in staffing and surely will increase response time for all studies, audits, and reports.²⁰

Last month, Comptroller General Gene Dodaro announced steps he was planning to take to prepare for the looming cuts. In an attempt to avoid mass layoffs, he announced a likely six-day furlough for each GAO employee next year.²¹ While this will not save every job, it will result in more than a week's lost time for an agency that cannot afford to lose a second. Dodaro expressed determination to make the best of the situation, but was forced to admit GAO "might end up producing fewer reports, or fewer testimonies, or experience longer delays before starting our jobs ... but we will not sacrifice quality."²²

All of this means that the very time Congress most needs GAO to help navigate the difficult budgetary choices ahead by identifying non-ideological cost savings, Congress is dealing the taxpayers' watchdog a blow. The ultimate impact will be inefficiencies paid for by American taxpayers.

¹⁹ Senate Committee on Appropriations, Senate Report 112-80, Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012, http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&dbname=cp112&sid=cp112zK7Qv&refer=&r_n=sr080.112&item=&&&sel=TOC_151798&.

²⁰ House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, Report 112-148, Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill for 2012, July 15, 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CRPT-112hrpt148/pdf/CRPT-112hrpt148.pdf>.

²¹ Losey, Stephen, "GAO avoids layoffs but may furlough employees," *Federal Times*, October 19, 2011, <http://www.federaltimes.com/article/20111019/DEPARTMENTS05/110190302/1001>.

²² Remarks of Comptroller General Gene Dodaro to all GAO employees, October 19, 2011.

3. Congressional Oversight is In Decline

Oversight can be conducted in numerous ways, but at its core it is the steps Congress takes to make sure federal agencies are doing the jobs they are supposed to do in a responsible manner. This can range from an informal phone call to a formal investigation, but in every case it involves Congress actively learning about the nuts and bolts of government with the aim of keeping it running smoothly. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 defined congressional oversight more succinctly as “continuous watchfulness.”²³



Despite a steady increase in committee budgets, the number of hearings has dropped dramatically over the past three decades.

For the purpose of this report, “oversight” is measured by the *quantity* of traditional oversight activities that Congress engages in, such as hearings, debates, votes and amendments. While this does not capture the *quality* of any individual member or committee’s efforts, it is a reasonable proxy for measuring the amount of oversight Congress is doing. These activities, if used well, have proven over the long term to get the attention of agencies and drive reforms.

Like a car that needs regular maintenance, committees of Congress need to regularly kick the tires of federal agencies. Without it, there is greater risk of costly malfunction. It is far too common for federal programs and agencies to go years without anyone in Congress paying attention until a crisis develops, at which point it is too late. The only solution available is to spend a lot of taxpayer money that may have been saved if problems were noticed earlier.

Unfortunately, long term trends show a sharp decline in congressional oversight. The problem, however, has not been a lack of funds to get it done. Over the last decade, the House and Senate budgets have nearly doubled in size and increased to a level that is more than \$1 billion higher. But despite this growth, everything from hearings to amendments to votes is decreasing, and with it oversight is in decline.

a. *Congressional Hearings in Decline*

Congressional hearings in particular were down in the most recent session of Congress. Committees held 318 fewer hearings in the 111th Congress than in the 110th Congress.²⁴ Committee hearings are not the only means of conducting oversight, but they are a prominent tool. Hearings give lawmakers the opportunity to unearth valuable information about federal programs and to question agency officials about the effectiveness of their management of those programs.

²³ Website of the National Archives and Records Administration, “Committee Resource Guide: Committees of the U.S. Senate,” (accessed November 9, 2011) <http://www.archives.gov/legislative/finding-aids/reference/senate/armed-services/1947-1954.html>.

²⁴ Data provided by the Congressional Research Service.

The House of Representatives, with its 22 committees, was primarily responsible for the decline, holding 450 fewer hearings in the 111th Congress than the previous two-year session.²⁵ While six House committees did, in fact, increase their hearing volume, they were far outnumbered by the 16 that scaled back their work. The House Foreign Affairs Committee held 95 fewer hearings while the Oversight and Government Reform Committee reduced its schedule by 59. The Committees on Foreign Affairs, Judiciary, Oversight and Government Reform, and Homeland Security combined to cut down their hearings by 277.

The Senate's hearing schedule appeared more active.²⁶ Half of all Senate committees held fewer hearings than in the 110th and one held none at all.

With limited exceptions, Congress has been holding fewer and fewer hearings over the past 30 years, according to data from both the University of Texas at Austin Policy Agendas Project and one by the Brookings Institution. The two data sets differ slightly, but both lead to the same conclusion.²⁷

“Half of all Senate committees held fewer hearings than in the 110th and one held none at all.”

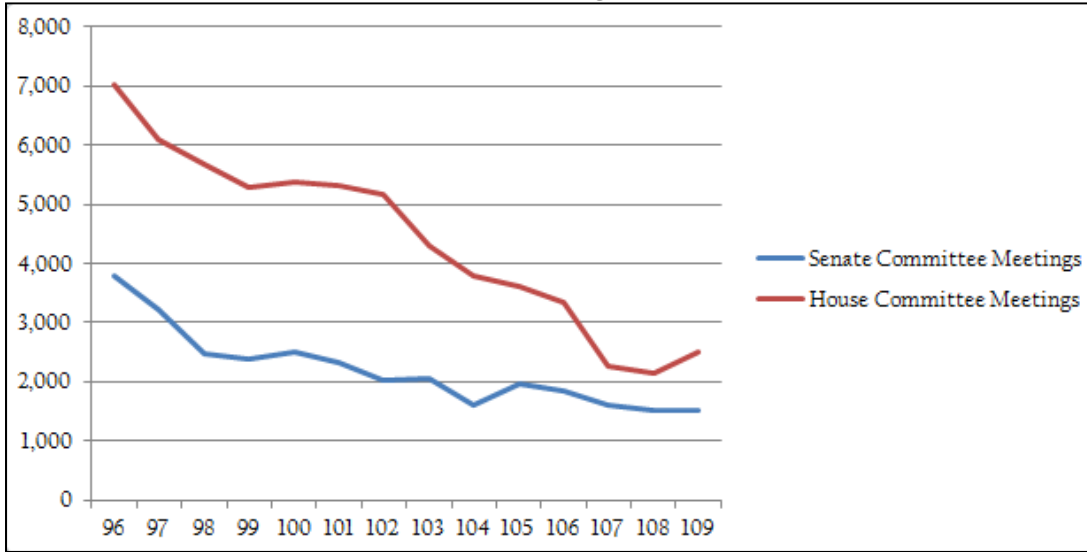
Data provided by the Brookings Institution shows the most drastic decline. The following chart breaks out the individual hearing totals for both the House and the Senate. As with the data from the University of Texas at Austin, congressional hearing activity began to decline significantly starting in the 96th Congress (1979-1980). The House saw a slight uptick in hearings, though its annual totals are still down by two-thirds compared with the number of hearings it did in the early 1980's. In the Senate, hearings and meetings are down by more than half.

²⁵ Data provided by the Congressional Research Service.

²⁶ In the 110th Congress, the Senate held 1,398 hearings, and in the 111th Congress held 1,529, representing a 9.4% increase.

²⁷ This finding comes from examining the two most reliable data sets on congressional activity, one compiled by the University of Texas at Austin Policy Agendas Project and one by the Brookings Institution. The two data sets differ in how they count, but both conclusively show hearings on the decline. Data supplied by the University of Texas at Austin Policy Agendas (UT-A) project came from the Congressional Information Service, a product of ProQuest, and can be found on Thomas.loc.gov. For a full look at its methodology, see here: <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/files/1263809>. Data supplied by the Brookings Institution comes from the publication *Vital Statistics on Congress*, 2008, for which information came from a variety of sources, including: the *Congressional Record*; the Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives; End of Session Committee Reports and Committee websites. While UT data included committee and subcommittee meetings, Brookings data also include business meetings. Additional differences in the data may be accounted for by the way each counted hearings, i.e. hearings that span several days or weeks were counted as a single hearing by UT-A, but appear to have been counted by Brookings once each day the committee met.

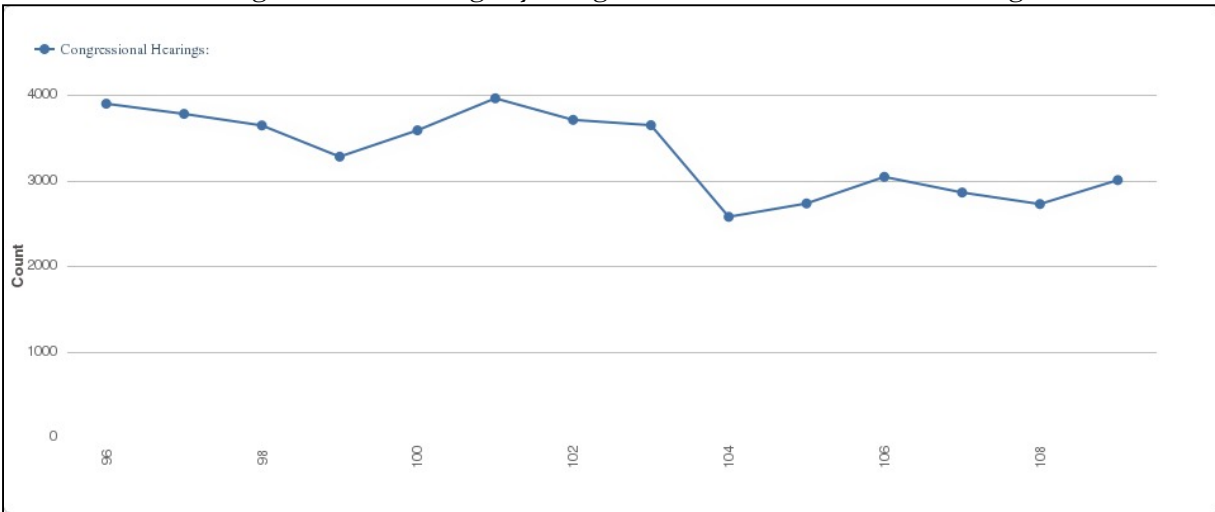
**Hearings Held in the Senate and House of Representatives by Congressional Session:
96th-109th Congresses**



Source: Brookings Institution

Data from the University of Texas at Austin shows a more gradual but steady decline in Congress' hearing load since the early 1980's, despite the increase in budgets and congressional staff size. In the 96th Congress (1979-1980) there were nearly 4,000 hearings held during the session. Today, the numbers rarely reach 3,000 and are frequently closer to 2,500. The single biggest decline came in the 104th Congress (1995-1996), which saw activity drop sharply by more than one thousand hearings, but the numbers have never quite recovered.

Total Congressional Hearings by Congressional Session: 96th-109th Congresses



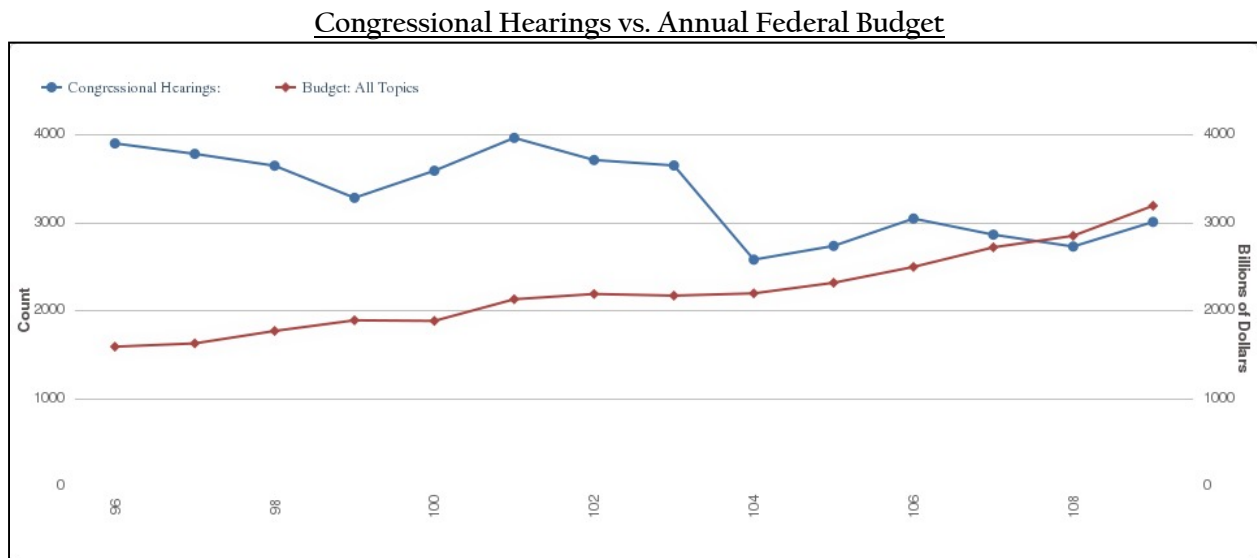
Source: Data supplied by the University of Texas at Austin²⁸

²⁸ The data used here were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant number SBR 9320922, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here. <http://www.policyagendas.org/page/trend-analysis>.

Not only is the sheer number of hearings dropping, though, the quality is also suffering. Those hearings that would be properly considered “oversight” hearings are also in decline. While there is significant overlap in hearing varieties, hearings are commonly classified in one of three ways: legislative, policy or oversight. The first two are intended for deliberation over various proposals, often leading to or discussing new legislation. The third is distinguished by having as its main purpose the evaluation of federal programs and agencies, or those issues for which they are responsible.

In 2001, the percentage of hearings that could be classified under the umbrella of “oversight” was approximately 48 percent.²⁹ By 2010, that percentage dropped to just below 40 percent. The impact of this drop in oversight hearings is even more pronounced, however, by the general downward trend in overall hearings. This means that not only is Congress holding fewer hearings, but those that it does are less and less focused on oversight.

Using the more conservative estimate as a baseline, the following chart shows that the reduction in hearings is no small problem: as the budget has increased, congressional hearings have decreased. This would imply that Congress is neglecting one of its most important accountability tools even as the federal budget has approached a crisis point. The following chart uses the most recent data available from the University of Texas at Austin and represents the situation through the 109th Congress.



Source: Data supplied by the University of Texas at Austin³⁰

Because “oversight” is a broad term, and refers to more than just hearings, some may object and point out that fewer hearings does not *necessarily* mean Congress is doing less oversight. However,

²⁹ The percentage of oversight hearings was determined by reviewing more than 3,000 hearings that occurred in both 2001 and 2010. Hearings were classified according to their major purpose, whether oversight, legislative or policy.

³⁰ The data used here were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant numbers SBR 9320922 and 0111611, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here. <http://www.policyagendas.org/page/trend-analysis>

revelations of a political problem or scandal are almost always followed by cries for hearings, and oftentimes an absence of hearings is seen as evidence that Congress is ignoring a key issue.

b. Blank Check Budgeting

A second sign of weakening congressional oversight can be seen in the way Congress has passed annual spending measures, known as appropriations bills. A trend has developed whereby individual spending bills are rolled into a single large “omnibus” bill, and voted on at once. Over the last 12 years of spending bill, Congress has passed 10 “omnibus” appropriations bills, passing fewer and fewer individually. By lumping all of the agency budget bills together, it effectively lessens the opportunity for specific questions and oversight.

The annual budgeting process, when it unfolds as intended, provides Congress the opportunity to raise questions to federal agencies about their actions and activities, and also to evaluate its programs. Public discussion and debate over these budgets, both in committee hearings and on the floor of both houses, allows both Members of Congress and the public to shine a light on how taxpayer dollars have been used, building in accountability. Short-circuiting these opportunities for Congress robs the taxpayer of needed oversight.

Every year, Congress is required to pass a budget resolution, essentially a road map for the next fiscal year for the country, primarily by setting spending levels for the fiscal year. The normal process of passing each of the 12 appropriations bills individually not only gives Congress more time to read and understand the bills, but it provides the time necessary to conduct oversight of federal agencies.

This is happening less and less. Over the last 25 years Congress has passed 17 omnibus appropriations bills, defined as those containing more than one appropriations bill, with 10 omnibus bills passing in the last 12 years. And over time the omnibus bills have gotten longer and longer, meaning they have included more and more bills normally passed individually. With the exception of 2002 and 2006, Congress passed omnibus bills containing at least five appropriations measures since 1999.³¹ Already more than one month into fiscal year 2012, Congress has not yet passed a single appropriations bill to fund the government for the year.

The sheer size of the bills is also exploding: in 2005, 2008 and 2009, each of the bills exceeded 600 pages in length. It is unrealistic to expect lawmakers to read and fully understand the content of these large omnibus bills that spend hundreds of billions of dollars. As a result, trillions are wasted.

The process has so effectively been turned on its head that it is now rarer for an appropriations bill to pass by itself rather than within an omnibus. In the last five years, only nine out of 37 appropriations bills were passed outside of an omnibus. And in 2009, Congress took the extraordinary step of putting every appropriations bill into two omnibus bills and passing them.

During fiscal year 2011, Congress did not pass a single appropriations bill. Instead, the spending bills were replaced by a series of eight short-term “continuing resolutions” that kept the government’s budget largely at 2010 levels. Continuing resolutions provide little, if any, opportunity for Congress to address issues at agencies. Their primary purposes are simply to keep the lights on, and so are rarely allowed to be amended or debated.

³¹ Tollestrup, Jessica, Congressional Research Service, “Omnibus Appropriations Acts: Overview of Recent Practices,” August 29, 2011 (RL32473).

In addition to appropriations bills, it should also be noted that the same process is employed with authorization bills. In the 109th Congress, the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009 was signed into law, but consisted of 160 individual bills, many of which were controversial.³² Again in the 110th Congress, an attempt was made to roll more than 100 bills together into a single piece of legislation.³³ Maneuvers such as these are intended to quell opposition and limit the opportunity for members to review any single bill.

c. *Fewer Amendments*

A third sign of weakening oversight is the Senate's own process for considering amendments to legislation, which is becoming increasingly difficult for anyone who does not support every provision within a given bill. Unlike in the House of Representatives, a senator can offer an amendment on virtually any topic to most bills that come before the Senate.³⁴ It is a privilege that can provide each member with a powerful oversight tool. Yet votes on amendments to legislation on the Senate floor are becoming less and less common.

In 2010 the Senate cast only 65 true votes on amendments.³⁵ That same year, Senators proposed 467 amendments to bills on the Senate floor.³⁶ This is emblematic of a larger problem. Since 2005, the Senate has seen a sharp decline in the number of votes on amendments.

The number of non-procedural amendment votes³⁷ has declined since the beginning of the 109th Congress.³⁸ The 111th Congress saw the number of such votes decrease by nearly a quarter since 2005.³⁹ And the year with the lowest total for non-procedural amendment votes was 2010.

As of June 21, 2011, the Senate took 92 roll call votes in total. Looking at the second session of the last Congress (2010), the Senate had conducted 196 roll call votes by that date. Not since 1989 has the Senate conducted so few votes by that date.⁴⁰

³² Phillips, Kate, "Wilderness Lands Bill Becomes Law," *New York Times, The Caucus* (blog), March 30, 2009, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/30/wilderness-lands-bill-becomes-law/>.

³³ Goode, Darren, "Dems aim for 100+ bills in 1 swoop," *Politico*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1210/45982.html>.

³⁴ Rule 16 of the Standing Rules of the Senate restricts amendments considered "general legislation," or authorizing, within an appropriations measure. Rule 22 restricts non-germane amendments to any legislation once cloture has been invoked for that legislation.

³⁵ Number obtained from information on the website of the U.S. Senate, "U.S. Senate Roll Call Votes in 111th Congress – 2nd Session (2010)," http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/vote_menu_111_2.htm.

³⁶ Information obtained from the Legislative Information System (LIS) of the U.S. Congress. This number does not capture amendments offered or voted upon in committee.

³⁷ The term "non-procedural amendment votes" refers to those that occur directly on an amendment. This is to differentiate from procedural votes to "table" an amendment or on a motion to proceed.

³⁸ Senate.gov; The 109th Congress was for years 2005-2006, The 110th Congress was for years 2007-2008, the 111th Congress was for years 2009-2010.

³⁹ Information obtained from the Legislative Information System (LIS) of the U.S. Congress. There were 314 non-procedural amendment votes in 109th; 240 in 111th.

⁴⁰ Information provided by the Congressional Research Service.

d. *Less Accomplished, Despite More Days in Session*

The low number of amendments was not the result of a lack of time, but rather the result of time poorly used. In fact, the Senate was in session for more hours in 2009, the latest year for which data is available, than any year since 2003, and before that 1995.⁴¹ The 191 days that the Senate sat in session was the highest it has been in 15 years.⁴² But, most of the time was not used for additional time for debate or votes. Instead, it spent hundreds of hours in what is known as a “quorum call.”

In the Senate, a quorum call is what happens when the Senate is in session, but nothing is happening on the floor. To fill the time between debate and votes, a clerk will slowly call the roll, reading out each Senator’s name in alphabetical order.

The Senate sat in a quorum call for more than 200 hours in 2009,⁴³ according to the Congressional Research Service, taking up one of every seven hours the Senate was in session.

In the current session, during 2011, the Senate has spent a full third of its time in a quorum call.⁴⁴ This is the highest percentage of time that any Congress has spent on quorum calls this far into a session since 1997.⁴⁵



e. *Ninety-Six Percent of Bills “Hotlined”*

Finally, the Senate has increasingly relied on a process known as the “hotline” to pass bills through the chamber.⁴⁶ Originally intended to help clear non-controversial measures through the more deliberate Senate, the hotline is now used even for major legislation. Unfortunately, it leaves the least opportunity for doing oversight.

⁴¹ Website of the Government Printing Office, Hearing Transcript, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Legislative Branch Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011,” Senate Hearing 111-609, March 4, 18, April 15, 29 (2010), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-111shrg54980/html/CHRG-111shrg54980.htm>.

⁴² Website of the Government Printing Office, Hearing Transcript, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Legislative Branch Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011,” Senate Hearing 111-609, March 4, 18, April 15, 29 (2010), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-111shrg54980/html/CHRG-111shrg54980.htm>.

⁴³ Information provided by the Congressional Research Service.

⁴⁴ Fahrentold, David A., “Senate legislation may slow, but quorums continue,” *Washington Post*, June 9, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/senate-legislation-may-slow-but-quorums-continue/2011/06/09/AG5aGvNH_story.html.

⁴⁵ The analysis covers the first 153 days of each of the prior twenty congressional sessions. Fahrentold, David A., “Senate legislation may slow, but quorums continue,” *Washington Post*, June 9, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/senate-legislation-may-slow-but-quorums-continue/2011/06/09/AG5aGvNH_story.html.

⁴⁶ Under the hotline process, a bill bypasses normal debate procedures and can be passed without a single vote of the full Senate, and thus presents the least opportunity for oversight.

Here's how it works. On a typical day, members will be informed via a telephone line, known as the "hotline," of requests to pass several measures (bills, resolutions, etc.) by "unanimous consent." If a senator does not actively object, the measures will be passed within a matter of minutes or hours without any debate. In the last Congress, 96 percent of all bills passed the Senate this way – the highest percentage in the last 20 years.⁴⁷ Over the same time period, Congress passed the fewest pieces of legislation by roll call vote.⁴⁸

The chart below, based upon calculations from the Congressional Research Service, shows that since 1995, the percentage of bills passed by the hotline has gradually increased. In the most recent full Congress, less than 50 pieces of legislation passed the Senate with a roll call vote.

Bills Approved in Senate: Roll Call vs. Hotline

Congress	Total Number Approved	Number Approved by Roll Call	Number Approved without a Roll Call (% of Total Approved)
111 th (2009-2010)	1047	46	1001 (96%)
110 th (2007-2008)	1211	59	1152 (95%)
109 th (2005-2006)	1260	60	1200 (95%)
108 th (2003-2004)	1259	68	1191 (95%)
107 th (2001-2002)	953	59	894 (94%)
106 th (1999-2000)	1261	80	1181 (94%)
105 th (1997-1998)	910	77	833 (92%)
104 th (1995-1996)	822	81	741 (90%)

Source: Congressional Research Service

The end result tends to be less oversight and less time to discuss effectiveness and efficiency—or even the purpose—of federal programs. While Members of Congress can conduct oversight in numerous other ways, many regard hearings, debates and amendments as the most effective tools. And yet, as these trends demonstrate, these tools are in danger of growing rusted from disuse.

⁴⁷ Information provided by the Congressional Research Service in a memo from Valerie Heitshusen and Elizabeth Rybicki, "Disposition of Measures in the Senate without a Roll Call Vote, 1989-2010," January 25, 2011.

⁴⁸ Information provided by the Congressional Research Service in a memo from Valerie Heitshusen and Elizabeth Rybicki, "Disposition of Measures in the Senate without a Roll Call Vote, 1989-2010," January 25, 2011.

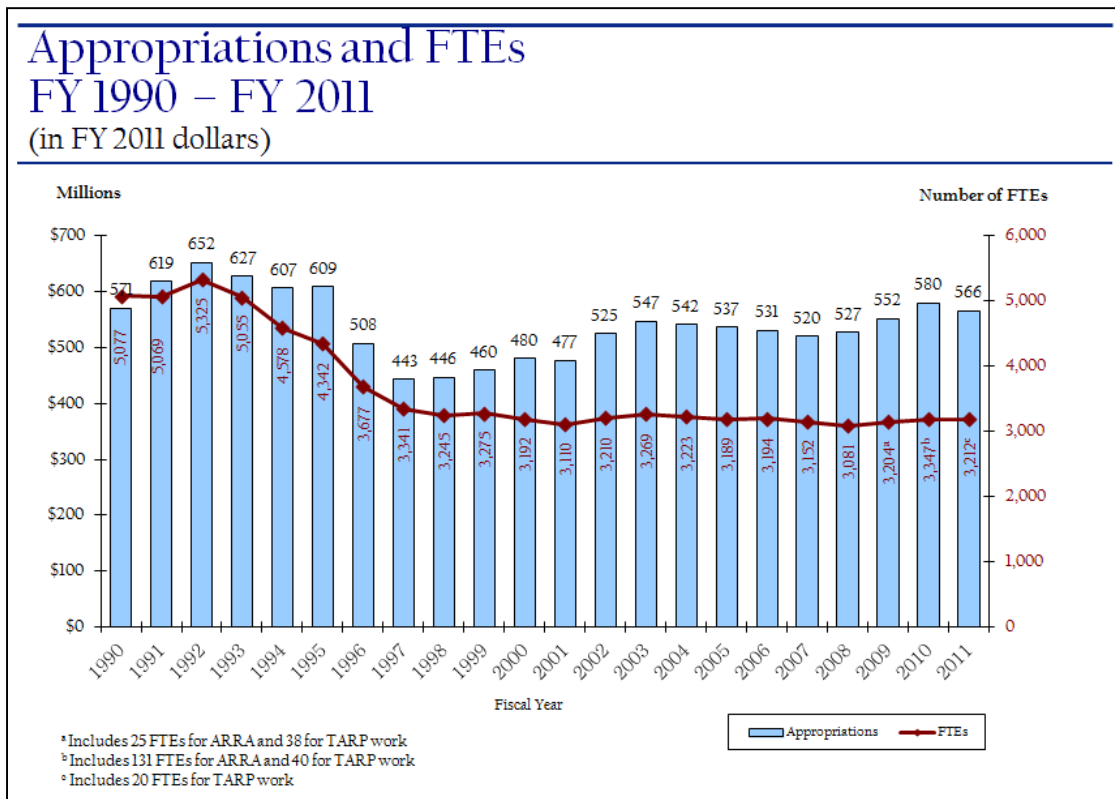
4. Congress Has Steadily Increased Its Own Budget While Decreasing GAO's

In the last decade, the congressional budget has increased by nearly 50 percent, yet GAO has barely seen any increase at all over the same time. Rather, the 15 year period between 1992 and 2007, GAO's staff was reduced by more than 2,100 people and its budget cut by more than 20 percent. Only in 2004 and 2011 did Congress see either a slight decrease or no increase in its own budget.

a. Long-Term Resource Cuts for GAO

Cuts are nothing new for the GAO. For the better part of two decades, GAO has seen its resources steadily dwindle, which invariably reduces the amount of work it has been able to produce.

The budget proposals being put forward today in Congress would cut the agency even further, reducing it even below 2002 in inflation-adjusted numbers. The House of Representatives would reduce 2012 levels by nearly 6.4 percent from 2011, while the Senate Appropriations Committee has proposed cutting further by 7.6 percent.⁴⁹ Compared with what GAO requested for 2012, \$556 million, the levels put forward by the House and Senate are 8.2 percent and 9.4 percent lower, respectively.



Source: GAO. Note: "FTE" means "full-time equivalent" and is a measure of employees at a federal agency within a given year.

⁴⁹ Senate Committee on Appropriations, Senate Report 112-80, Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012, http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&dbname=cp112&sid=cp112zK7Qv&refer=&r_n=sr080.112&item=&&&sel=TOC_151798&

Along with the downward trend of GAO's budget, its staff has also declined,⁵⁰ even as the rest of the federal budget grew significantly. As stated above, between 1992 and 2007 GAO saw a sharp decline as its staff was reduced by more than 2,100 people and its budget cut by more than 20 percent, in inflation-adjusted dollars. Over the same time, the overall federal budget grew by 100 percent,⁵¹ and the total public debt rose from \$5.6 trillion to \$13.6 trillion.⁵² Looking at federal spending over an even shorter period of time, 1999-2010, federal spending *more* than doubled, increasing from \$1.7 trillion to nearly \$3.5 trillion.⁵³

GAO's staff of investigators, accountants and auditors is being required to do much more with much less. In 1992, GAO had 5,325 employees, far outnumbering its current total of 3,212. If the current budget proposal is enacted, GAO has announced that it will likely take its staffing levels down below 3,000 for the first time in its history.

b. Congress Has Rapidly Increased Its Own Budget and Staff

While it was cutting GAO's budget of the past decade, both the Senate and the House of Representatives received sizeable budget increases. Since 2000, the combined budget of the House and Senate has grown from \$1.2 billion to nearly \$2.3 billion.⁵⁴ In 2010, the budget for the House of Representatives was \$1.369 billion and in the Senate was \$926 million, their highest levels in history.

2011 saw Congress show some restraint in relation to itself, instituting a modest three percent budget reduction, providing the House with \$1.311 billion and the Senate with \$914 million.⁵⁵ 2012 will also likely see modest reductions, with current proposals reducing the Senate by 5.5 percent⁵⁶ and the House by 6.4 percent.⁵⁷ This means that while the House proposed cutting itself as much as GAO, the Senate proposed far deeper cuts for GAO.

The following chart illustrates the steady growth of Congress' budgets between 2000-2009, nearly doubling over a decade of relatively low inflation.

⁵⁰ Report of the Government Accountability Office, "Fiscal Year 2008 Budget Request: U.S. Government Accountability Office," March 16, 2007, GAO-07-547T, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07547t.pdf>.

⁵¹ Website of the Office of Management and Budget, Historical Tables, Table 1.1-Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits (-): 1789-2016, 1992 Outlays: \$1.381 trillion compared with 2007 Outlays: \$2.782 trillion, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2012/assets/hist01z1.xls>.

⁵² Website of Treasury Direct, "The Debt to the Penny and Who Holds It," search for fiscal years 2000 through 2010, <http://www.treasurydirect.gov/NP/NPGateway>.

⁵³ Website of the Office of Management and Budget, Historical Tables, Table 1.1-Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits (-): 1789-2016, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2012/assets/hist01z1.xls>.

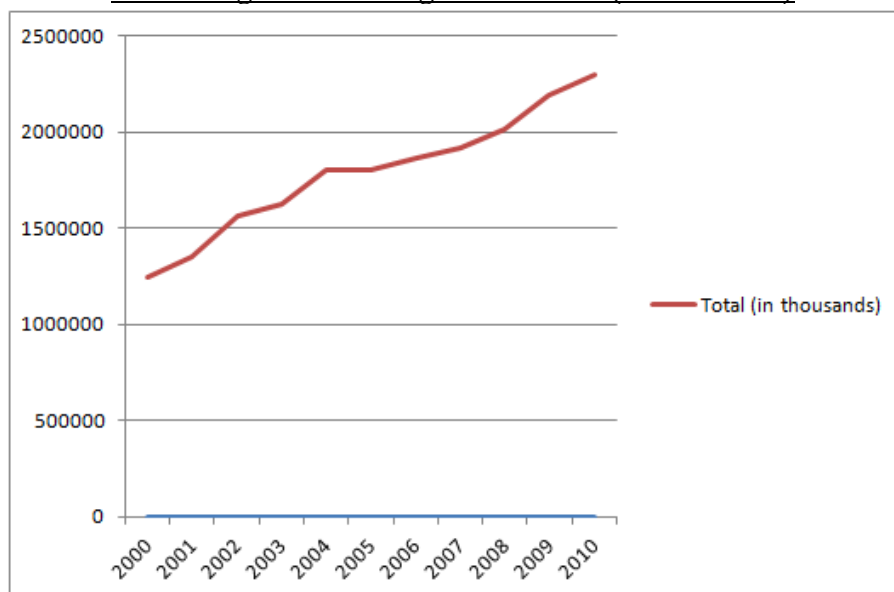
⁵⁴ Information provided by the Congressional Research Service.

⁵⁵ Information provided by the Congressional Research Service.

⁵⁶ Website of the U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, Press Release, "Summary: FY12 Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill," September 15, 2011, <http://appropriations.senate.gov/news.cfm?method=news.view&cid=3d381e5b-e99b-4348-8fb5-cd4d591d5ef2>.

⁵⁷ Website of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, Press Release, "House Passes FY 2012 Legislative Branch Funding Bill," July 22, 2011, <http://appropriations.house.gov/news/DocumentSingle.aspx?DocumentID=253295>.

Total Congressional Budget: 2000-2010 (in thousands)



Source: Data provided by CRS

These increases were applied to the budgets of both members' personal office accounts as well as committees. Looking first at personal office budgets, the Senate supplies each member with an Official Personnel and Office Expense Account, which currently allows each office to spend between \$3 million and \$4.5 million, adjusted for the population of the state represented by each senator. In 2001, the total amount available for all Senate offices was \$252 million,⁵⁸ but in 2011 it was more than \$409 million.⁵⁹ This represents an increase of more than 62 percent over that time.

In the House, each office is provide with a Members' Representational Allowance (MRA), which today is between \$1.4 million and \$1.7 million per year.⁶⁰ In 2011, the total amount of funding available for MRAs was \$613 million, down from \$660 million in 2010.⁶¹ Before the recent downturn, MRA funding was up more than a third over the decade.

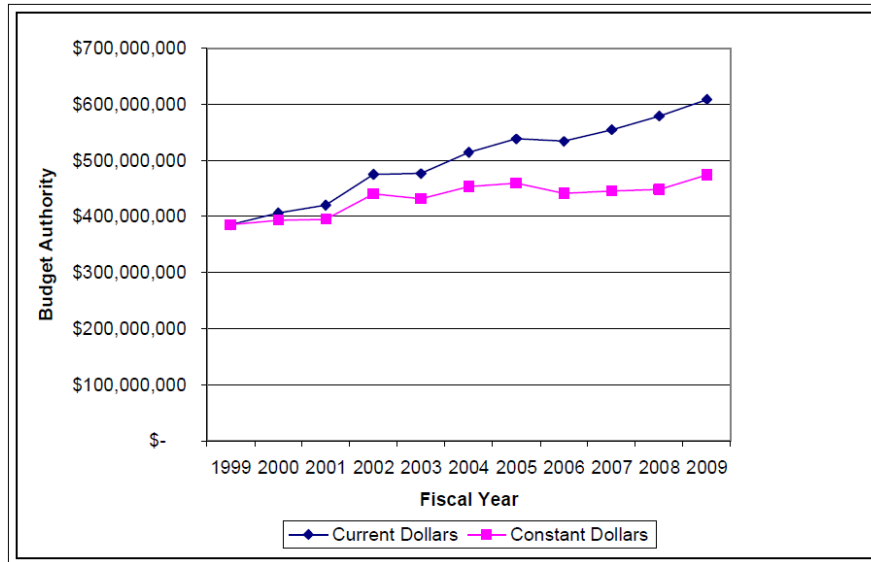
⁵⁸ Dwyer, Paul E., Congressional Research Service, "Appropriations for FY2002: Legislative Branch," Updated April 10, 2002 (RL31012).

⁵⁹ Brudnick, Ida A., Congressional Research Service, "Legislative Branch: FY2012 Appropriations," October 21, 2011 (R41870).

⁶⁰ Brudnick, Ida A., Congressional Research Service, "Members' Representational Allowance: History and Usage," January 5, 2011 (R40962).

⁶¹ Brudnick, Ida A., Congressional Research Service, "Legislative Branch: FY2012 Appropriations," October 21, 2011 (R41870).

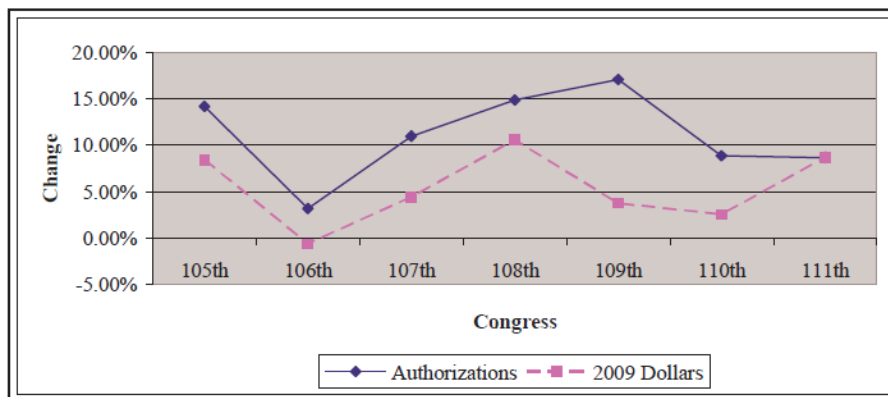
Figure I. Fiscal Year Appropriations for the Members' Representational Allowance
(current and constant dollars: FY1999-FY2009)



Source: CRS calculations based upon annual legislative branch appropriations acts. Constant dollars based on Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor). Base year = 1999. The FY2010 appropriation, which was provided in P.L. 111-68, is \$660 million.

As with personal office budgets, committees have also seen funding increase, at times significantly. Committees in the House received \$163 million in 2011,⁶² up from \$122.6 million in 2001.⁶³ The following chart shows that funding has gone up in each of the last six congresses. The total increase in just the 108th and 109th Congresses topped 30 percent over that time, a remarkable four-year climb.

Figure I. Change in Overall House Committee Funding Levels, 105th-111th Congresses



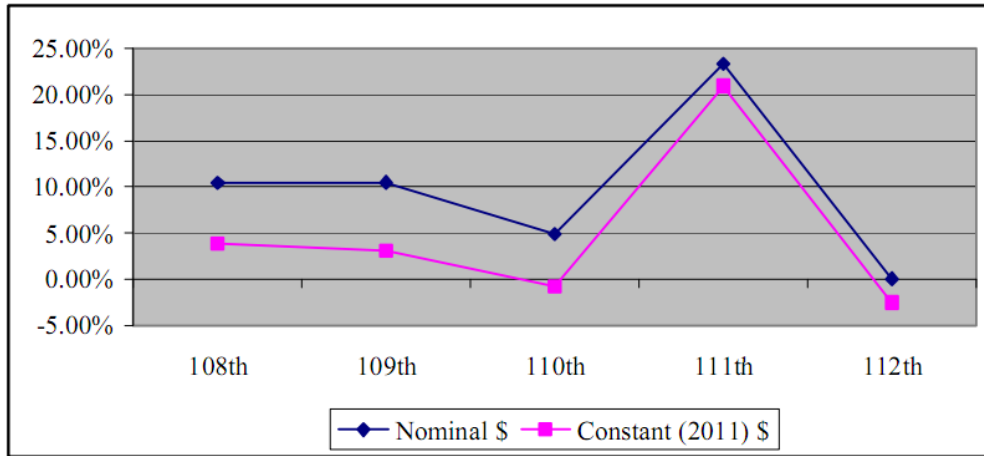
Source: CRS, Report R40204

⁶² Brudnick, Ida A., Congressional Research Service, "Legislative Branch: FY2012 Appropriations," October 21, 2011 (R41870).

⁶³ Dwyer, Paul E., Congressional Research Service, "Appropriations for FY2002: Legislative Branch," Updated April 10, 2002 (RL31012).

In the Senate, committee budgets have also increased steadily, from \$91.8 million in 2001⁶⁴ to \$156 million in 2011.⁶⁵

Change in Overall Senate Committee Funding Levels, 108th-112th Congresses



Source: Congressional Research Service, Report R40424, CRS calculations based on Senate committee expenditures resolutions. Excludes funds authorized for the reserve fund.

Staff increases throughout Congress also stand in stark contrast to the staff reductions at GAO. Between 2000 and 2009, the number of House of Representative staff increased by nine percent to 9,808.⁶⁶ On the other side of the Capitol, the number of Senate staff has swelled by 24 percent to 6,099 between 2001 and 2010.⁶⁷ Overall, there are now well over 15,000 congressional staffers.

The largest gains have been seen in leadership offices over the last three decades. According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), “Staff in Senate leadership offices showed the greatest percentage increase, rising 340% since 1977.”⁶⁸

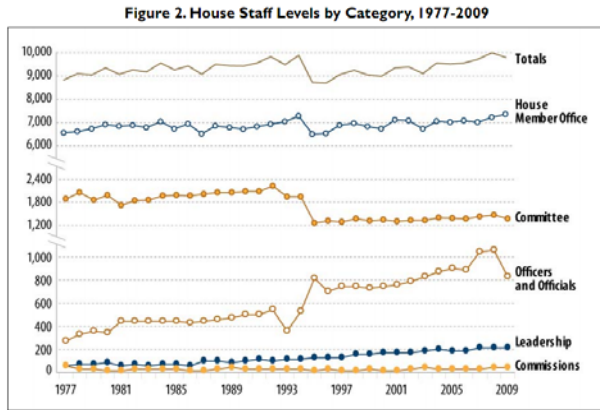
⁶⁴ Dwyer, Paul E., Congressional Research Service, “Appropriations for FY2002: Legislative Branch,” Updated April 10, 2002 (RL31012).

⁶⁵ Brudnick, Ida A., Congressional Research Service, “Legislative Branch: FY2012 Appropriations,” October 21, 2011 (R41870).

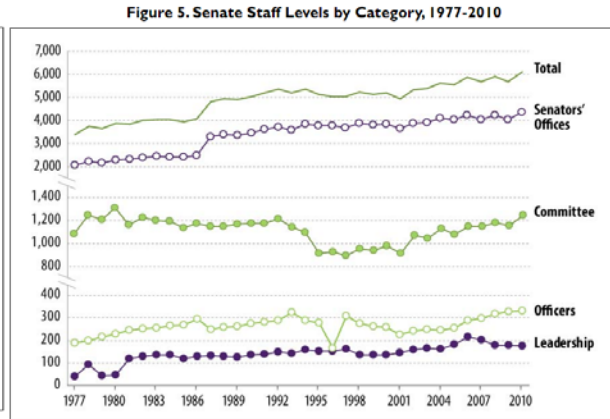
⁶⁶ Petersen, R. Eric; Parker H. Reynolds; Amber Hope Wilhelm; Congressional Research Service, “House of Representatives and Senate Staff Levels in Member, Committee, Leadership, and other Offices, 1977-2010,” August 10, 2010 (R41366).

⁶⁷ Petersen, R. Eric; Parker H. Reynolds; Amber Hope Wilhelm; Congressional Research Service, “House of Representatives and Senate Staff Levels in Member, Committee, Leadership, and other Offices, 1977-2010,” August 10, 2010 (R41366).

⁶⁸ Petersen, R. Eric; Parker H. Reynolds; Amber Hope Wilhelm; Congressional Research Service, “House of Representatives and Senate Staff Levels in Member, Committee, Leadership, and other Offices, 1977-2010,” August 10, 2010 (R41366).



Source: House telephone directories, CRS estimates and calculations.
Notes: House Member office data is an estimate developed from a sample of 45 Member offices for each year, multiplied by the number of Member offices. All other categories are based on a full count of directory listings.

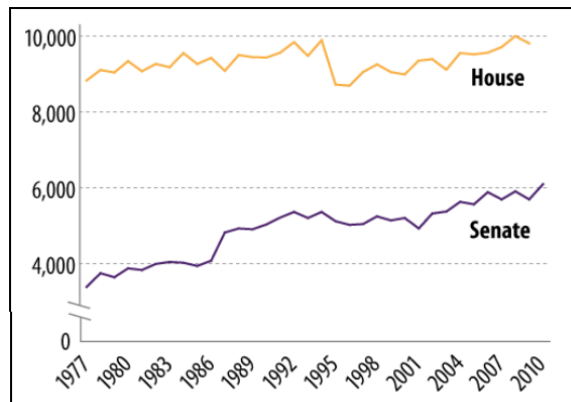


Source: Senate telephone directories, CRS calculations.
Notes: All categories are based on a full count of directory listings.

The chart below shows that the number of Senate staff has risen since the late 1970's from fewer than 4,000 to more than 6,000 today. In the House, the story is slightly different. There, significant cuts were made to the number of staff in the mid-1990's, only to steadily rise back to their former levels.

Interestingly, for both the House and Senate, the only category of staff it has cut is those on its committees, which are primarily responsible for congressional oversight. While committee staff numbers have remained largely unchanged in the House, Senate committees have gradually increased in recent years.⁶⁹ On the contrary, staff for personal offices has increased rapidly, as well as for those holding leadership positions.

Figure 1. House and Senate Staff Levels Since 1977



Source: House and Senate telephone directories, various years, CRS calculations.

Notes: House data through 2009. Senate data through 2010.

⁶⁹ Petersen, R. Eric; Parker H. Reynolds; Amber Hope Wilhelm; Congressional Research Service, "House of Representatives and Senate Staff Levels in Member, Committee, Leadership, and other Offices, 1977-2010," August 10, 2010 (R41366).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

For nearly 90 years, GAO has served as a vital arm of Congress, helping it keep close tabs on federal spending. Without it, Congress would have difficulty performing its constitutional role of overseeing the Executive Branch.

While it is not perfect, few agencies in government rival GAO's reputation for objective, timely and robust oversight. Every week the agency issues dozens of reports, and has earned for itself the oft-used title of "congressional watchdog." Time and again its work serves as the basis for congressional hearings, debates and legislation, and billions of dollars in savings and efficiencies.

Every day, GAO produces volume after volume of independent, tough and fair reports on the effectiveness of federal programs. Untold billions of dollars have been saved by its auditors and investigators who quietly do the difficult work of going line-by-line through program budgets, identifying problems and offering solutions. Its invaluable work is relied upon by Republicans and Democrats alike—something replicated nowhere in government.

a. GAO Shrunk as Government Grew

In times past, however, GAO was much larger even though the federal government was much smaller. At its peak, the agency employed more than 14,000 people to help Congress oversee the huge surge in government spending during WWII.⁷⁰

Its small army of accountants and clerks focused largely on auditing receipts and making sure agency books were balanced. Following WWII, however, the agency handed off its basic accounting duties to the Executive Branch and began to take a broader look at the management and efficiency of federal agencies,⁷¹ much as it does today.

While this change in mission resulted in GAO's workforce being cut in half to 7,000, Congress increasingly relied on GAO to evaluate programs.⁷² Demand for its work increased in Congress as the size, scope and cost of government grew rapidly from Cold War military spending along with the creation of new entitlement programs and cabinet-level departments.

In 1950, the entire federal budget was \$42.6 billion⁷³ and employed 2.2 million people. Today the federal budget is more than \$3.7 trillion with nearly one million more employees and a contract workforce of millions more.

Yet, GAO is less than half the size it was in 1950. While it remains enormously productive, the agency is far more limited than it needs to be for the work Congress demands of it.

⁷⁰ Website of the Government Accountability Office, "This History of GAO – The Early Years," (accessed November 9, 2011), <http://www.gao.gov/about/history/earlyyears.html>.

⁷¹ Website of the Government Accountability Office, "This History of GAO – After World War II," (accessed November 9, 2011), <http://www.gao.gov/about/history/postwwii.html>.

⁷² Website of the Government Accountability Office, "This History of GAO – After World War II," (accessed November 9, 2011), <http://www.gao.gov/about/history/postwwii.html>.

⁷³ Website of the Office of Management and Budget, Historical Tables, Table 1.1-Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits (-): 1789-2016, 1992 Outlays: \$1.381 trillion compared with 2007 Outlays: \$2.782 trillion, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2012/assets/hist01z1.xls>.

In 2011, GAO employed a workforce of 3,200 with an agency budget nearly \$100 million less in inflation-adjusted dollars than two decades ago. The fiscal year 2012 budget proposals being put forward today in Congress would cut the agency even further. The House of Representatives would reduce 2012 levels by nearly 6.4 percent, while the Senate Appropriations Committee has proposed cutting further by 7.6 percent.⁷⁴

If these cuts are not reversed, GAO may not only have to cut its workforce down below 3,000 next year, each remaining employee may have to be furloughed. This of course is a significant problem for the employees of GAO and their families, who depend on a paycheck. Perhaps more importantly, it is a major problem for taxpayers who will pay the cost of this work not getting done.

b. Congress Needs GAO's Help to Solve Budget Crisis

Members of Congress should strongly reconsider the wisdom of this decision, instead recognizing that without a strong GAO we will not be ready to address our enormous fiscal problems.

The debt of the United States is quickly approaching \$15 trillion. We need the eyes and ears of GAO to help us find solutions to get ourselves out of this mess.

Congress' budget, however, continues to soar while GAO's falls. The solution to our problem is for Congress to get back to basics. This means setting aside the perks of the job in favor of doing the hard work of oversight. We need more hearings, more investigations, more debates and more votes—namely, more oversight.

It also means significantly trimming our own budgets and eliminating wasteful spending. During my first term, my office proved that this is possible by returning an average of more than 16 percent of our budget each year, saving more than \$2.9 million.

It is time for serious leadership, which should begin by getting our own fiscal house in order.

c. Recommendations

To address these concerns, there are a number of things Congress should do.

First, restore GAO's budget to prior levels and eliminate any planned cuts for 2012. GAO's budget was cut in 2011, and further cuts in 2012 would do significant harm to the agency's ability to conduct proper oversight of federal agencies.

Second, look for cuts within Congress' own budget to achieve needed savings. Congress has given itself significant increases through recent years and can make additional cuts to offset the restoration of GAO's budget.

⁷⁴ Senate Committee on Appropriations, Senate Report 112-80, Legislative Branch Appropriations for 2012, http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&dbname=cpl12&sid=cpl12zK7Qv&refer=&r_n=sr080.112&item=&&&sel=TOC_151798&.

Third, request that GAO identify areas of long-term savings in its own budget. In recognition that all agencies will have to sacrifice, GAO should also look for savings options over the long-term to tighten up its own budget.

Fourth, require agencies to reimburse GAO for audits that uncover significant waste and inefficiencies. Agencies that are found by GAO to have wasted significant funds above an established threshold should be required to pay for such audits. Similar practices are common at a variety of regulatory agencies, which perform fee-for-service oversight of the industries they oversee.