

**Congressman David E. Price**  
**Committee on Rules Hearing on the Biennial Budgeting and**  
**Appropriations Act (H.R.114)**  
**January 24, 2012**

- A dozen years ago next month, I testified before this distinguished Committee about a proposal very similar to the one you are considering today. The circumstances could not have been more different: the enactment of multi-year budget agreements in 1990, 1993, and 1997, coupled with a growing economy, had produced several years of balanced budgets and allowed us to pay down more than \$400 billion of the national debt. The consequences of the George W. Bush Administration's fiscal policies had not yet been foreseen.
  
- Following a decade of zero net economic growth, trillions of dollars in lost tax revenue, two unpaid-for wars, and a necessary but expensive government response to the Great Recession -- and after a year in which the worst of congressional budget politics have been on full display -- it is understandable that that the idea of biennial budgeting would once again hold some appeal for well-intentioned Members in search of solutions to our current woes. I have a deep respect for my good friend Chairman Dreier, whose concern for the well-being of our institution is as great and as genuine as any member of this House. But this is truly a case in which the remedy is worse than the disease.

- I am the first to agree that the congressional budget and appropriations processes have eroded significantly in recent years. The pressures of divided government and a polarized electorate, the increased use of the Senate filibuster, and the general subjugation of Congress's "power of the purse" to partisan political considerations have greatly delayed the enactment of our annual spending bills and have increased our reliance on bloated omnibus packages.
- But biennial budgeting would do nothing to address the underlying causes of this dysfunction -- and would likely make matters worse by weakening congressional oversight of the executive, jacking even more decisions up to the leadership of both parties, and increasing our reliance on supplemental appropriations bills considered outside of the regular order.
- Most importantly, biennial budgeting would weaken Congress's power to shape national priorities by conducting effective oversight of the Executive Branch. Proponents of biennial budgeting claim that it would "free up" Congress to conduct oversight in the off year. That claim is surprisingly ironic, for the most careful and effective oversight Congress conducts is through the annual appropriations process, when

an agency's performance and needs are reviewed program by program, line by line. Off-year oversight would be less, not more, effective because it would be, in a word, impotent, further removed from actual funding decisions.

- Supporters like to note that four recent presidents -- George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Ronald Reagan -- all supported biennial budgeting. Of course they did! If this suggests that the proposal is not a partisan issue, it should warn us that it is definitely an institutional power issue. Of course Presidents would support a free pass every other year from a legislative process that could make or break an administration's agenda -- just as they tend to support the line-item veto, a ban on congressional earmarks, and other challenges to Congress's authority vis-à-vis the Executive Branch.
- It is often asserted that opponents of biennial budgeting are merely defenders of Appropriations Committee turf. As a senior appropriator, I am naturally sensitive to these charges. But the annual work of appropriations serves the entire institution and its place in the constitutional balance of power. And in one respect it could make the work of appropriations leaders less accountable: faced with outdated and unworkable funding levels for individual programs in the second year of a biennial appropriation, each federal department will be forced

to present the Appropriations Committee with countless requests to reallocate, or “reprogram,” their annual budgets. Typically, those requests are granted or denied solely by the Appropriations Subcommittee Chairmen and Ranking Members without debate, amendments, or votes -- and without public scrutiny.

- Off-year budget problems that could not be handled through reprogramming requests would necessitate supplemental appropriations bills. We already enact supplemental bills when unforeseen emergency needs crop up after an appropriations bill has been enacted. Budgeting two years in advance will only lead to a greater mismatch between the country’s needs and agency budgets. In fact, the whole purpose of a biennial budget could be undermined by the proliferation of supplementals in the off-years. Perversely, we would have replaced the deliberative and democratic process of annual appropriations with supplemental bills that are sporadic, rushed, and heavily controlled by leadership.
- In fact, our experience last year should lead us to conclude, if anything, that the annual appropriations process may be the best chance we have of the kind of bipartisan cooperation that will be required to get a handle on our long-term fiscal situation. Where the Supercommittee failed to come to agreement even on the basic terms of a long-term

deficit reduction package, the Appropriations Committee produced two year-end appropriations packages that -- while far from perfect -- produced significant budget savings and were drafted, considered, and approved on a bipartisan basis.

- For reasons practical as well as institutional, biennial budgeting isn't any better an idea today than it was a decade ago. It would be a mistake to allow recent budget disagreements to lure us toward a supposed "remedy" that would make the appropriations process less systematic, less flexible, and less potent. It isn't the congressional budget process that is in need of repair -- it is our collective will to make difficult and politically costly decisions. I urge all of my colleagues to reject the siren song of biennial budgeting and redouble their efforts to address the underlying causes of our long-term fiscal challenges.