



Photo Montage/New York Times

The Underachievements of Congress

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By RALPH NADER

WASHINGTON—Congress has been a continuous underachiever. It would be difficult to overstate the extent of abdication to which Congress has been driven by external and internal forces. Contrary to its pre-eminent constitutional authority and constitutional stature as the branch of Government closest to the people, it has been reduced to a puny twig through which flows the allocation of a massive taxpayer treasure chest of over \$200 billion in appropriations, largely at the beck and call of executive

branch and special interest advocacy and pressure. It reacts to the executive far more than it initiates.

In the more important Congressional hearings and deliberations secrecy is rampant, contributing to the great difficulty of the populace in establishing performance standards and specific accountabilities. More critical is the process of entrance to the national legislature—wracked with obstacles and expenses for those who wish to contend on the merits and the issues.

What does the public know of Congress? Not much. There is, to be sure, a widespread cynicism about "politi-

cians" along with a feeling that nothing can be done about them beyond mere endurance. At times, a reading of postures toward the Congress leads to the conclusion that three major attitudes prevail—that it is something to be manipulated by interest groups or bureaucracy, something to be ridiculed or something to be ignored either because it is an ornament or that it is hopelessly beyond reach.

Nothing remotely compares with the Congress as the hope of reclaiming America.

Accordingly, we are launching what is probably the most comprehensive

and detailed study of Congress since its establishment. The nonpartisan Congress project will enlist the assistance of hundreds of citizens covering nearly every Congressional district.

If information is the currency of democracy, it is time to apply that principle to the sinews of citizenship involvement with their representatives in Congress. Who is to say that our Congressmen and Senators would not welcome the participation of the people?

These remarks are from a recent talk in Washington by Ralph Nader.