

Politician travel abroad declines in election year

The gridlocked House of Representatives was more landlocked than usual in 1992, as members sharply cut back their foreign travel in an election year teeming with voter unrest over Capitol Hill and Capital Beltway life styles.

Roll Call Report Syndicate's annual survey of official travel overseas by House members found that the number of trips declined by more than one-third below the levels of preceding years. It also found few Michigan representatives taking trips.

The travel consists mainly of fact-finding committee trips or special jaunts authorized by Speaker Thomas Foley, D-Wash. It is funded by taxpayers through an array of legislative and executive branch accounts.

The survey of public records identified 134 House members traveling overseas during the year, a decline of 34 percent from the

204 members who took official trips abroad in 1991. They took 216 individual trips (down 39 percent from 1991) over 1,386 days (down 40 percent) to 460 countries (down 63 percent).

Travel in 1992 took an even sharper drop when compared with levels as far back as 1989, when Roll Call Report Syndicate began its survey.

"I think that members have gotten gun-shy about travel in general because the public doesn't like it," said Joan Claybrook, president of the Ralph Nader group Public Citizen.

"There's been a lot of negative press," said Armed Services Committee staffer Peter Steffen, "and I would say that maybe 10 percent of everything that's been reported is probably worthy of being reported. No matter how well intentioned the travel is or how much is done for their constituents or the Congress, that never seems to

come out.

"Members are saying, it's just not worth it anymore."

However, 1992 produced several frequent flyers, most notably Democrat Jim McDermott of Washington. The three-term legislator from Seattle took five trips over 63 days to 20 countries to become the reigning king of House travel.

Senate travel, which is reported to the public only in sparse detail, was not covered by the survey.

The image of congressional travel appears to be still reeling from a 1990 expose by ABC's "Prime Time Live" that gave a nationwide television audience its first detailed look at members of Congress at play on foreign soil. Hidden ABC cameras at a Barbados resort recorded several lawmakers consorting with and accepting freebies from Wash-

ington lobbyists. The lawmakers were on the final leg of a Ways and Means Committee trip.

Despite such hijinks, congressional travel overseas is seen by many as necessary to give lawmakers the firsthand knowledge and world perspective they need to do their job.

"There is every reason in the world why the United States government should have some travel to Japan," said Jeff Biggs, the spokesman for Foley. "That sort of face-to-face contact gives you something you don't get out of a textbook."

Claybrook said Public Citizen feels that government-sponsored travel is sometimes appropriate. "It depends on what it is for. And if it is fully reported, and not using military aircraft when that is not necessary . . . and the trip has a functional purpose and

there is a report prepared by the member on what they do, then I think that that's extremely appropriate."

Her group reserves its wrath for the far more numerous corporate-sponsored trips by which House members and senators flock to vacation spots to spend time with lobbyists who pick up the bill.

The cost of House travel is difficult to measure because the departments of State and Defense, which pay most of the tab, do not provide a line-item public disclosure of their funding. There is no evidence that either department isolates and tallies what they spend on congressional travel.

A limited public disclosure is contained in the trip listings that committees and other sponsors

are required by law to publish in the Congressional Record. These show a trip's per diem expense allowances and approximate transportation costs. For 1992 House travel, the total is \$4.5 million. That figure, which reflects staff as well as member travel, is down from \$4.6 million in 1991.

For congressmen from Eccentric districts, their number of trips, days away and countries visited are: Joe Knollengerg, R-11th District, not listed because he was elected in November 1992; his predecessor, William Broomfield, revised District 18 and a Republican, took no trips. Sander Levin, D-12th District, also took no trips. Dale Kildee, D-9th district, took no trips.

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