

An Open Letter to the Congress and the President of the United States

For the last 35 years, educators and analysts at The Heritage Foundation have been intimately involved in the nation's great public policy debates. In all that time, we have never encountered legislation with such far-reaching and revolutionary policy implications as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act currently before Congress. And never have we seen a bill more cloaked in secrecy or more withdrawn from open public exposure and honest debate.

In addition to being the single most expensive bill ever proposed, this measure calls for a massive expansion of the federal government's reach into the day-to-day life of virtually every citizen, business and civic organization in the nation. That, in itself, should be the subject of an extensive public conversation and thoughtful debate. Instead, we have seen Congressional leaders schedule snap votes on a 1,434-page bill that no one—repeat, no one—has had a chance to read in its entirety, much less digest and deliberate.

This bill has been advertised as an economic stimulus bill—despite the fact that the Congressional Budget Office estimates it will actually weaken our nation's long-term economic growth. While the stimulative utility of the bill is, at best, questionable, it would unquestionably rewrite the social contract between the American people and their government. For example:

- The bill reverses the bipartisan and highly successful welfare reforms of 1996 and drastically expands the welfare state. For instance, it will start rewarding states for adding people to their welfare rolls, rather than for helping them find gainful employment. And contrary to long-established practice, it will entitle able-bodied adults without children to receive cash assistance.
- It does extreme violence to the concept of federalism—bailing out states that have spent irresponsibly at the expense of taxpayers in states that have been fiscally prudent.
- It greatly shifts the responsibility and power over health care delivery and decision making from individuals to government. Among other things, it would create a new federal health board to decide which medical services are "effective" in America, paving the way for government effectively to overrule the clinical decisions of private physicians.
- It deliberately censors religious speech and worship on school campuses by prohibiting use of any "stimulus" funds for facilities that are used for sectarian instruction, religious worship, or a school of divinity.

The list goes on. These and similar provisions will mean fundamental changes in our society. In many instances, the bill would establish policies that directly challenge widely held American values.

We are appalled that Congress is even contemplating such profound changes with so little openness and due diligence. In the past, major policy changes in our welfare system, or health care, or trade policies, etc., were always, quite properly, preceded by extensive public conversation and full debate. That is how a democracy should make important decisions.

The failure of Congress and the Administration to allow that debate is damaging to our democracy. Both chambers of Congress suspended their budget rules to push it along. And both the President and the leaders of the House and Senate have violated their solemn promises that the bill would be available for several days of public review prior to voting, so that the American people might have a chance to learn what is in the bill and to make their views known to their elected officials.

This reckless approach to governance can only undermine public faith in our elected officials and our government as a whole. We call on Congress and the Administration to live up to their promises and stated ideals, and give the democratic process a chance to work.

Sincerely,



Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D.
President
The Heritage Foundation



Heritage President Ed Feulner