

The national scene

Solons enjoy fat salaries, pensions seek to trim elderly

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The U.S. senators and representatives who are deliberating on how to best balance the Social Security fund are the ones who don't have to worry about the rich retirement benefits they get.

Despite the tight governmental finances, the House voted itself a \$9,300 increase in the last session to bring their salaries to \$70,900.

The Senate, in what was intended to be a generous gesture of self denial, refused the increase but they voted to remove the limit they could earn from outside sources. Many of them are millionaires and most have outside interests; they can earn thousands more in speaking engagements and activities that would likely make the \$9,300 a year boost look insignificant by comparison.

It appears ironical that taxpayers foot the bills for \$70,900 a year salary for members of Congress, yet these so-called public servants can take time out to earn extra money on the side.

Yet these fat cats will decide how much they will trim or restrict the comparatively few dollars aged pensioners get, many of whom are barely subsisting.

Only last year, the members of Congress accepted \$75 a day for the "hardship" of living in Washington when they are attending Congress which is most of the year. It amounts to nearly \$20,000 a year extra for expenses. Most of them own or are buying houses in the nation's capital so it is difficult to believe they are maintaining an extra home in their home state. Actually, some sold or are leasing or renting their homes in their own state for extra income.

It was humorous, for example, for Rep. Larry Craig of Idaho's First District to announce he would not accept the \$9,300 boost. Yet, he was the same one who accepted the full \$75 per day expense for living in Washington, saying he had to maintain a "second home." Craig is unmarried.

Sen. James A. McClure and Rep. George V. Hansen announced they would only take part of the \$75-per-day sweater but that was last year. Sen. Steve Symms, with valuable ranch holdings near Caldwell and considered the richest of the Idaho delegation, at least was frank in saying he was accepting the entire amount.

It also may be observed here the pensions for state employees are modest by comparison. Generally they get two-thirds of the average of their highest salaries of five years. As Idaho is notable for paying its state employees among the lowest salaries in the nation; they don't exactly loll in luxury.

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Retirement benefits for the various categories of state employees have different formulas but state officials say the retirements generally compare with those of the average pensioner.

Congressmen are eligible for pensions at age 62 if they have at least five years of government service. They are computed under a complicated formula but may not exceed 80 percent of their salary.

A lawmaker with 32 years experience can now retire with a yearly pension of \$47,000. With only 18 years, a lawmaker can retire with over \$26,000.

For example, former U.S. Sen. Frank Church gets a \$35,000 a year pension, plus many other fringe benefits, as do former long-time Congress members. Church was only 54 years of age when defeated for re-election in 1980 after 24 years service in the Senate, plus four years in the military during World War II. Since then he has joined a prestigious law firm in Washington and close friends say Church earns double and triple his congressional pay.

Under the Privacy Act of 1974, the exact amount of an individual's federal pension is a secret. However they may receive up to 80 percent of the average salary for their three highest paid years. Considering their salaries are \$60,000, plus thousands more in expenses, health, insurance, free travel junkets and many other benefits, they face a cozy and rich retirement future. Also computed is length of federal service, including time in the armed forces.

On this basis, a member of Congress serving a long time upon reaching 62 could get a pension as high as \$56,000 a year.

It is these members of Congress who are certain of generous pensions of their own who will be deciding the niggardly pensions by comparison the bulk of senior citizens will get. They agree some retrenchment is needed to keep the Social Security fund from bankruptcy. But these congressmen have no need to worry over their own fat salaries and pensions.