

Congress on the road again

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Not all congressional trips are junkets, where a vacation is disguised as a conference. What's not right is when a lawmaker is essentially a sham speaker and allows a special interest group to pick up the tab at a resort.

Congress remains on holiday break, and a lot of members and staffers are on the road at someone else's expense. You know what? In most cases, that's OK, and that may surprise some readers of this column.

Travel is educational and broadening, and, if not abused, it is proper for the federal government to pay. I also don't have a real big problem in letting some organizations with a foreign policy interest pay the tab for lawmakers. Everything depends on the particulars.

In the parlance of Congress, official trips are called "codels," short for congressional delegations. I've talked to a number of members and staffers through the years about these trips, which are useful in understanding the international arena. The travel is usually fascinating, with extraordinary access to world leaders. It is work in the sense that you can't skip a dull meeting with a foreign minister because of jet lag.

House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) departed over the weekend for a 13-day Asian swing focused on trade, military and anti-drug matters. The first leg of the codel was in Honolulu, where he addressed the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum.

Hastert has been in Japan the past few days, and on Wednesday was set to meet with members of the Japanese Diet before moving on to the Imperial Palace to pay a call on Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko. From Japan, Hastert flies to Thailand and then to South Korea, where he visits troops at the DMZ on Saturday.

Today, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) is in Israel, part of a tour with other lawmakers to the Middle East sponsored by the Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation that includes Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. On Wednesday, Durbin was set to meet with Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Earlier in the week, Durbin talked with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in their respective countries.

On Friday, Durbin arrives in Berlin, where he hooks up with a senatorial entourage led by Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) for a codel to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan,

Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan and Afghanistan.

Rep. Jerry Weller (R-III.), in South America, today is scheduled to attend the inauguration of the new president of Nicaragua, Enrique Bolanos. Bolanos defeated Sandinista leader and former President Daniel Ortega last November. In the next few days, Weller will meet with Paraguay's President Luis Gonzalez Macchi.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-III.) is on her second trip to India, a nation of interest to her because many of her constituents have roots in the country. The costs for Schakowsky and her husband, Bob Creamer, are covered by the Confederation of Indian Industries, a nonprofit trade development organization holding a large conference called "Partnership Summit 2002."

Schakowsky delivered a speech to the group on how the United States can promote business ties with India and was scheduled to attend a lunch at the Israeli Embassy.

Staff travels almost as much as members, which makes sense since staffers are very influential in the shaping of legislation.

While House International Relations Committee Chairman Henry J. Hyde (R-III.) is at home; he has eight committee staffers abroad: Four are in West African countries, another two are in Brussels and Berlin, and two more are in Korea, Hong Kong and Vietnam.

In smaller countries, the staff visits attract news coverage. The Associated Press on Tuesday carried a story about 12 U.S. staffers in Malaysia thanking Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad for his nation's help to combat terrorism. The lead quote on the meeting was from Kathleen Lydon, chief of staff for Rep. Judy Biggert (R-III.). Lydon, according to Malaysia's national news agency Bernama, said the group "conveyed to him our appreciation of Malaysia's stand on the issue and policy to overcome the problem."