

# Congressional Research Service

Gilbert Gude

If you think about it a little bit, the average Congressman represents about a half million people, and he or she is usually so busy that a 24-hour day is pathetically inadequate. With the kind of demands Congressmen encounter on a daily basis, there is an overriding need for accurate, particularly for concise, unbiased and objective information addressing the major issues of the day. Furnishing this information for all members and committees of Congress is the responsibility of the Congressional Research Service, a congressional support agency, which has developed since 1914 under legislative mandate to provide the Congress with objective and non-partisan information, including reference material and indepth research of public issues.

## History of the Service

By 1912 members of Congress were making altogether three to four calls a day to the Library of Congress asking for information; this included requests for books as well. In fact, during the course of a year's session, only 90 to 100 of the 490 members of Congress called on the Library for information support. In 1914 Congress decided that within the Library of Congress they should have their own legislative reference service which was to be exclusively for Congress. This new service and its use within the Library grew slowly.

Throughout the period of the 1930s and the early 1940s, the primary efforts of the Legislative Reference Service were for general reference information and the compilation of statutory indexes. By the end of World War II, Congress was asking the Legislative Reference Service approximately 16,000 questions annually, and the Service had a staff of about 95 to provide the answers. Such activity by the end of World War II was really wholly inadequate for congressional information needs. War had moved legislation dramatically from the relatively simple creation and funding of social agencies to some very remarkably complex laws bearing on such specialized and diverse subjects as atomic energy, local aid and rehabilitation, vast housing programs, and a momentous centralization of governmental services at the federal level. The Congress recognized that many of its own procedures were outmoded and addressed these inadequacies in the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946.

The '46 Legislative Reorganization Act expanded the Service across the board and authorized the Librarian of Congress to appoint specialists and senior specialists in public affairs fields of major concern to the Congress. By establishing the institution of senior specialists at the Legislative Reference Service, Congress was really reaffirming the basic principle that our legislature is co-equal with the executive branch. Congress stated that the legislative branch would have its own expert resources in several fields of governmental concern and that these resources were to be equivalent to those available to the executive branch of government. So by law, senior specialists in CRS have the

same grade as the top specialists in the executive branch; however, it is impossible for CRS to have the same number of experts as the executive because, after all, the President has as a resource a half trillion dollar budget, which is about 500 times that of the congressional budget. But the intent is that the experts available to Congress are to be just as good as the President's and we feel that indeed, though we do not have the quantity, we do have the quality.

From this initiation of specialists and senior specialists in 1946, the workload of the Service continued to grow steadily. There were more information requests, but the nature of some of the inquiries from Congress also required more research analysis. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 changed the name of the Legislative Reference Service to Congressional Research Service and declared that the director was to be appointed by the Librarian in consultation with the Joint Congressional Committee on the Library; in so far as possible the Service was also to be administratively independent of the Library. The Congressional Research Service was further directed to enlarge greatly its support of congressional committees and to develop greater analysis and research capability.

To achieve these goals Congress mandated a three-fold increase in personnel. This increase has been realized and today the CRS numbers about 850 people, handling a little better than 310,000 requests annually. As compared to the 3 or 4 requests a day in 1912, Congress now asks in the neighborhood of 2,000 requests a day when operating at full tilt; and today the Congressional Research Service serves annually all the members, all the committees, and about 85 or 90 percent of the subcommittees in Congress.

## Current Organization

The Service is organized into seven research divisions, two library information divisions, and several specialized offices. The research divisions are American Law, Economics, Education and Public Welfare, Environment and Natural Resources Policy, Foreign Affairs and National Defense, Government, and Science Policy Research. The reference and library information divisions are Congressional Reference and Library Services. The specialized offices include Assignment; Reference, and Special Services; Automated Information Services; Management and Administrative Services; Member and Committee Relations; Policy, Planning, and Review; Research, Analysis, and Multidisciplinary Programs; Senior Specialists; and the Director's Office.

CRS's 614 professional staff members are extremely diverse and include attorneys, economists, engineers, information scientists, librarians, defense and foreign affairs analysts, political scientists, public administrators, and physical and behavioral scientists. About 535 people are employed in the research divisions, 185 in the reference and library information divisions, and 140 in the various administrative and support offices.

The services provided to Congress range from in-depth policy analyses, legal research and legislative histories to tailored research—for instance, statistics, biographies, quotations; books, articles, reports, and studies; general background information on a subject; and bibliographies. A broad variety of on-line computer information files are available to Congress through the Library of Congress SCORPIO automated information retrieval system. Audio or audio-

visual formats as well as oral presentations in individualized briefings or in seminars and workshops are also utilized.

The Service produces several publications on a continuous basis, some of which are by-products of the SCORPIO system. Three such publications are the *Digest of Public General Bills and Resolutions* (or *Bill Digest*), *Major Legislation of Congress* (or *MLC*), and *Issue Briefs*. The *MLC* is a monthly journal containing abstracts on about 700 key legislative issues; *Issue Briefs* (updated daily, weekly, or monthly as events dictate) average between six and ten pages in length and provide a definition and general background discussion on the issue, identification of current legislation, listings of hearings and congressional documents, a chronology of events related to the issue, and a selective bibliography of relevant materials for further study. The *Bill Digest* is simply the printed version of the legislative file in SCORPIO and contains the digest and status of every public bill and resolution before the congress. The *MLC*, the *Bill Digest*, and a semiannual list of *CRS Studies in the Public Domain* are distributed to libraries in the documents depository system by the Superintendent of Documents of the Government Printing Office.

## Research Services

The Iranian situation provides an excellent example of how the total resources of CRS can address an issue and assist members of Congress and their staffs in evaluating a complex problem area and making the best decisions possible. The very type of serendipity hoped for by the Congress when the Reorganization Act of 1970 tasked CRS to anticipate the needs of members and committees in depth was fulfilled by a CRS report that was dated September 11, 1979, almost two months before the crisis in Iran. The report, titled "Islam in Iran, the Shi'ite Faith, Its History and Teachings," Brief, was produced by an analyst in our Government Division. Similarly, an *Issue Brief*, "Iran Crisis: The Fall of the Shah," had been on-line in our own automated information system (SCORPIO) since September 15. These analytic reports resulted in part from a member dinner and staff seminar which the Research Service conducted early in April. Following this *Issue Brief*, we produced at CRS a series of reports and *Issue Briefs* to keep members and staff conversant with all aspects of the rapidly changing crisis. Promptly after the American Embassy in Tehran was seized on November 4, the Iran Task Force of our Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division produced a comprehensive *Issue Brief*, "Iran: Confrontation with United States." This was produced in hard copy and went on-line in the Scorpio System also. The Task Force, since November the 4th, has updated this *Issue Brief* every day, both in hard copy and also on the Scorpio screen for all the congressional offices that use the computer system.

In addition to these two items, the Research Service produced a total of seven reports in November and December, such as the "Iranian Oil Cut-off: Economic Effects," "Responsibility of Iran under International Law for United States Diplomats and Citizens in Iran," and "Embargoing U. S. Agricultural Exports to Iran."

A well-designed *Issue Brief* or report that is prepared before a problem of widespread Congressional concern exists can efficiently and immediately answer a broad range of potential inquiries. A thoughtfully assembled "kit" of

materials can fulfill the same function. Indeed one out of every five requests that we receive in the Congressional Research Service is now handled through the use of the prepared CRS material. These prepared materials, very often put together by our senior analysts and researchers who have been doing support work for committees, in turn free these very researchers who prepared the reports to do other in depth research and not have to answer, one after another, a series of requests that are very similar.

Taking what is really a kaleidoscope of governmental and political information and transferring it into a comprehensive picture or series of pictures of clear and helpful knowledge, whether it is for the country, a particular region of the country, or the world, for the past or, more importantly, the future, is the vital role of the Congressional Research Service.

Gilbert Gude is director of the Congressional Research Service.

### EDITOR'S NOTE

Reports by the Congressional Research Service are not distributed to depository libraries nor available in general. A few are reprinted in Congressional hearings and committee prints, but not on a systematic basis. An extensive, if not comprehensive, collection has been microfilmed and is for sale by University Publications of America, 5630 Connecticut Ave., Wash., DC 20015, in the "CBS Series": *Major studies of the Legislative Reference Service/Congressional Research Service, 1916-1974*; *Major studies of the Congressional Research Service, 1975-1976 supplement*; *Major studies and issue briefs of the Congressional Research Service, 1976-78 supplement*; *1978-79 supplement*; and *1979-80 supplement*.

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