

BUNKER MENTALITY

Roll Call

April 22, 2002

The good news on the doomsday front is that House leaders are moving with some dispatch to appropriate \$100 million for an alternate meeting site for Congress in the event of a terrorist attack on Washington, D.C. The bad news is that the legislative branch is moving slowly to consider rules or constitutional changes necessary to keep itself functioning in the event of a catastrophe.

House Appropriations Chairman Bill Young (R-Fla.) told The Associated Press last Thursday that Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) had asked him to include the \$100 million in President Bush's \$27.1 billion supplemental spending request for defense and homeland security. Hastert reportedly is not happy with Young for disclosing the move, and leadership offices are refusing to disclose much about how the money will be spent. AP quoted Senate sources as saying it would be used to equip a location where Congress would convene in the event of an attack on the Capitol.

From a public-policy standpoint, it's positive that these preparations are under way. And, for security reasons, the public should not be given a lot of details. But Fort McNair in Southwest Washington seems too close to the Capitol to serve as more than a temporary evacuation point for Members. Moreover, Congress' old Cold War relocation spot at the Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia is now so widely known that Congress surely needs to find a new site.

While it's good that Congress will have a bunker, it's not good that so little has been done to address the problem of who would fill it in the event that a large number of Members - especially House Members - were incapacitated. The Constitution allows Senate vacancies to be filled by governors, but House vacancies must be filled by special election, which could take

hundreds of days. This newspaper has been serving as a forum for written debate on proposals to answer the problem - House rule changes, legislation or a constitutional amendment - but Congress itself has held just one hearing on the matter.

Rep. Christopher Cox (Calif.), chairman of the House Republican Policy Committee, has said he hopes to launch a joint study of continuity issues with Democrats. The American Enterprise Institute and The Brookings Institution are on the verge of forming a blue ribbon commission to conduct an outside study. But House and Senate leaders need to order Congressional committees to get to work. This problem likely is solvable only by a constitutional amendment. If so, Congress' new bunker may be built before an amendment ever passes.