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WASHINGTON OVERVIEW:
“GURGLE, GURGLE, GURGLE.” IS THAT THE SOUND OF RON DESANTIS’ PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN CIRCLING THE DRAIN? THE POPULAR (AT LEAST IN FLORIDA) GOVERNOR’S QUEST FOR THE NOMINATION APPEARS TO BE FALLING FLAT. NO PARTICULAR REASON WHY. HE DOESN’T APPEAL TO RINOS OR NEVER-TRUMPERS; HIS MESSAGE IS NOT THAT DISTINCTIVE; HIS PERSONALITY NOT PARTICULARLY WARM AND CUDDLY.

“Long, long ago, before eruptions were invented, the molten lava had to be carried down the mountainside, bucket by bucket, and poured over the sleeping villagers. This took time.”

—Dave Barry

Official Washington just took a two-week vacation in the hope that a change of scenery might cool some tempers. I went to the Big Island of Hawaii, where even the lava eventually cools off. Now Congress is back, but the eruptions are hotter than ever.

“Double, double, toil and trouble. Fire burn and caldron bubble.” Everyone in Washington knew that the Biden-McCarthy budget compromise just set the stage for a showdown on specific spending

measures, but the abruptness and ardor of the first major clash surprised even the most experienced Congressional cynics. After several days of heated debate, the House passed the \$886 billion National Defense Authorization Act—a normally bipartisan measure—by a vote of 219-210, with four Democrats crossing the aisle to ensure passage of the military spending bill. The legislation includes a 5.2% pay increase for service members and \$300 million in additional aid for Ukraine.

In a template to be expected in coming Congressional spending votes, the House included a series of key “culture wars” amendments demanded by House conservatives, e.g. rescinding the Pentagon’s policy of paying travel expenses for out-of-state abortions; cutting DOD spending for diversity, equity and inclusion and critical race theory education; and barring funding for transgender medical treatments and for hosting drag shows on military bases (!).

But the House also reaffirmed bipartisan support for Ukraine, defeating two amendments from the GOP’s isolationist wing to cut off additional funding by votes of 341-89 and 358-70. Those votes were key.

The NDAA debate was instructive in that it showed the degree to which House conservatives are willing to push back against the Biden Administration’s social policies—even at the risk of a government shutdown come October 1st or losing votes in November 2024. It also showed the Speaker’s willingness to bend to their demands in order to keep the entire House from grinding to a halt. Remember, the budget compromise only kicks in on January 1st, leaving an uncomfortable three-month gap in 2023 government spending to be approved. A real witches’ brew just in time for Halloween.

“**Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle.**” Is that the sound of Ron DeSantis’ presidential campaign circling the drain? The popular (at least in Florida) governor’s quest for the nomination appears to be falling flat. No particular reason why. He doesn’t appeal to RINOs or Never-Trumpers; his message is not that distinctive; his personality not particularly warm and cuddly. Rising in the polls is probably the nicest guy in the race, Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina. But the man so many love to hate continues to be a double-digit favorite to capture the Republican nomination. He was also an odds-on favorite to win a second term in 2020, before Covid hit. Shifts happen.

Speaking of which, President Biden’s hold on the Democratic nomination seems slightly less secure—at least if you are watching the maneuvering of possible wannabes such as California’s Gavin Newsom. Few are willing to challenge the king at this point, but more and more seem to be eyeing the throne. Particularly as the king demonstrates more and more difficulty getting on and off it.

—*John C. Gore*