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MAY

September 28, 2011

Happy Tidings From the Hill

By **GAIL COLLINS**

In our never-ending battle to bring you good news from the world of politics, let's focus today on the fact that Congress appears to have reached a deal to keep the government operating for seven more weeks.

Think of all the things you'll be able to do in October if there's a government. Camp out in a national park! Mail a letter! Fly to Omaha without fear that your plane will crash into a plane flying to Sioux Falls because of a lack of air traffic controllers! Wage war in Afghanistan!

Life doesn't get any better than that.

The latest stalemate in Washington has been over the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which had been running out of cash what with all the recent fires, floods, earthquakes, plagues of frogs and what have you. Republicans wanted to balance any new FEMA money with cuts elsewhere. Democrats said that when disaster strikes, the tradition is to pony up and deal with the financing issues later.

Republicans said yeah, and that's how we wound up \$14.7 trillion in the hole. And then the Democrats said no way, we got the hole from the Bush tax cuts, and then the Republicans kicked them in the groin and everybody had to go to the emergency room.

O.K., I can hear you all asking: Whatever happened to Willow the cat?

Willow, you may remember, disappeared from her home in Colorado five years ago and turned up recently in a shelter in New York City. Now *that* was a feel-good story. Her whole family was flown to New York to appear on the "Today" show for a reunion. Why can't Congress ever do things like that?

Back to Congress: The government's fiscal year ends this weekend, and FEMA decided it could make it to Saturday on spare cash that it had found in the sofa. Whew.

The Senate then voted 79 to 12 to keep the government running for the following seven weeks. "It shows us the way out. It means we no longer have to fight," said Harry Reid, in a deeply uncharacteristic show of euphoria.

You may be wondering about the 12 people who voted *against* this idea. They were all Republicans, and their most common argument was that they just wanted to make things work better. “Americans are tired of gridlock and games in Washington, and so am I,” said Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri in a press release.

Way to battle gridlock, Senator Roy Blunt!

Marco Rubio of Florida, who is constantly being mentioned as a possible vice presidential candidate in the event the Republicans ever find someone to nominate for president, said that he had voted against the bill because he wanted to protest “this dysfunctional Washington way” of running the government. This is a little like protesting the slowness of rush-hour traffic by abandoning your car in the center lane.

But back to Willow the cat. During one of her TV reunions, Willow bit her owners’ 3-year-old daughter. In the flesh, Willow looked pretty standoffish. We might as well have been celebrating the return of a long-lost goldfish. Maybe she *liked* living in New York.

Meanwhile, the bill to keep the government operating for seven weeks now goes to the House, where it’s expected to pass. Probably. They think.

But wait! There’s more! Remember when I told you the current fiscal year ends this weekend? (It was a few paragraphs back, before Willow bit the 3-year-old.) Congress is on vacation. So in order to get us through the gap, the Senate passed yet another spending bill, this one to keep things running for four days.

That was on a voice vote, depriving anybody of the opportunity to take a strong, principled, public stance against having government on Saturday.

It now goes to the House, where in one of those parliamentary thingies that drive us all to discussions of missing cats or the possible breakup of Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher, the bill is supposed to be passed on Thursday in an empty chamber.

If a single representative shows up and objects, the four-day funding bill is dead and the government shuts down this weekend. But, of course, what would make anyone think that there could be a member of the House of Representatives crazy enough to make the trip back to Washington just to bring the entire federal government to a crashing halt?

“Actually, we’re holding our breath,” said one House staffer, who claimed that the Republican leadership had made a list of the most free-spirited members of the Tea Party cadre and got commitments from everyone to get through the weekend with the Grand Canyon open for business.

Which, if it works, would be pretty good news, don’t you think? No one in the House of

Representatives actually wants to single-handedly shut government down in its tracks.

Ever lower, goes the bar.