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The Senate won't officially go into a Fourth of July recess this year, because of an odd constitutional requirement that both chambers give permission to the other to end its session. For this holiday, the House of Representatives left town without giving the Senate its OK. This wasn't an oversight: House Republicans don't want the Senate to recess, because they don't want President Barack Obama to make recess appointments.

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(AP Photo/Jim McKnight)
Caitlin Halligan, nominee for the District of Columbia Circuit Court of Appeals

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More than two and a half years after Obama took office, the federal government still has a huge number of vacancies. There are more than 140 pending nominations for positions in the executive branch and 71 in the federal judiciary. Obama deserves some of the blame. The Alliance for Justice, a legal activist group, notes that he has nominated judges at a lower rate than any other recent president. Moreover, the administration has been slow to fill vacant positions in a whole host of federal agencies, from the Treasury Department to the Justice Department. But Senate Republicans have used filibusters, holds, and other Senate procedures to delay presidential nominees at every opportunity. At this point, there is an effective stop on most nominees from the president, whoever they are and to whichever agency they're nominated.

But that doesn't mean some of the blocks don't stand out as especially pointless. Here are five of the silliest.

John Bryson, the former CEO of Edison International, who was nominated to

head the Department of Commerce. Bryson's nomination has supporters from across the political and business worlds, including from the former chief of staff to President Ronald Reagan. But that apparently doesn't mean much in light of Bryson's early career as an environmental lawyer (he helped found the Natural Resources Defense Council) and his support for environmental legislation (including the cap-and-trade bill passed by the House in 2009). Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming, a member of the Senate Republican leadership, summed up GOP opposition when he attacked Bryson for "founding an extreme environmental organization" and "advocating job-crushing energy taxes." Even if that weren't true of Bryson, 44 Republican senators have promised to block any commerce secretary nominee until the White House approves a series of

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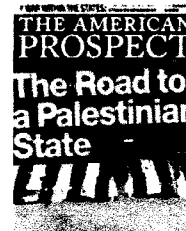
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free-trade deals.

Philip Coyle, who was appointed last year to become associate director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy. It's a minor position, but his credentials are excellent: He served in the Pentagon for seven years as an assistant secretary of defense and was selected by President George W. Bush to serve on the Base Closure and Realignment Commission. Yet immediately after his nomination, right-wing groups mounted a campaign to obstruct his nomination. His transgression? While working as senior adviser at the Center for Defense Information, Coyle pointed out something that most security analysts already agree on: The long-range missile defense programs, the ones the military keeps begging Congress to stop funding, simply don't work.

Caitlin Halligan who was picked to fill a vacancy on the District of Columbia Circuit Court of Appeals. Republicans love to put holds on all of Obama's judicial nominees, but Halligan's case highlights how small-bore the objections can be. A former solicitor general for the state of New York, Halligan took part in a 2003 lawsuit in which the state sought to hold gun manufacturers liable for crimes committed using illegally distributed guns. New York's complaint was eventually rendered moot by federal legislation, but gun-rights groups never forgot Halligan's involvement. The National Rifle Association and other organizations have issued letters opposing her confirmation, and Senate Republicans—led by Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa—have kept her nomination on hold for more than ten months.

Stephen Six, who is nominated for the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals. Six, a former county judge and state prosecutor, wasn't at first considered a controversial nominee. But anti-abortion groups soon mobilized against his nomination, citing his handling of abortion cases as Kansas' attorney general. In particular, Six refused to prosecute Planned Parenthood and has pushed for records gathered by his predecessor to be returned to the organization. After opposition from pro-life activists, his nomination was held up by Kansas Senators Pat Roberts and Jerry Moran, despite endorsements by a bipartisan group of lawyers and legal officials.

Anyone Obama nominates to head the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. The president hasn't selected someone to permanently fill Elizabeth Warren's shoes, but Republicans plan to block any nomination just to undermine the new institution, which was created with the Dodd-Frank financial-reform legislation. Forty-four GOP senators have signed a letter saying they would oppose any nominee to the agency and are pushing Democrats to weaken the agency as a condition for considering a nominee. This particular case best sums up the Republican philosophy on nominations. "Conservatives don't necessarily want to see agencies that can implement rules, regulations, and hold special interests accountable," says Marge Baker, executive vice president for Policy and Program at People for the American Way. "Part of what you do to stop the agencies is refuse to staff them with people who can do the job."

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