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## Secret holds

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OF ALL THE maddening practices that clog the arteries of the national legislature, the most infuriating may be the Senate institution known as the "secret hold." [As has been vividly demonstrated this year, a single senator can stop action](#) -- on a piece of legislation or a pending nomination -- by placing a "hold." No reason needs to be given, though generally one is, often having nothing to do with the merits of the underlying issue.

This exercise is troubling enough, although some defend it as an important attention-getting device. Even more troubling, though, is the practice of the secret or anonymous hold. This is a 100-member game of Clue in which some unknown senator is holding up action but is unwilling to take the heat of doing so publicly or explaining why.

This is unacceptable in a democratic body -- as even the Senate has agreed time and time again. In 1999, for example, we lauded Senate leaders for ending "an indefensible and odious practice." In 2007, we reported the happy news that, with the new ethics and lobbying law, "those who place holds on legislation must come forward within six days." But the secret hold has somehow managed to live on -- despite the valiant efforts of Sens. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) to kill it.

Now, the relentless duo -- they've been at this since 1996 -- is trying again, with [an amendment to the pending financial reform bill](#). Senators have apparently managed to evade the requirement to come forward within six days or drop the hold by simply handing off the anonymous hold to an anonymous colleague. Sen Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) aptly calls this "hold laundering." In addition, the six-day period is triggered only when the measure is formally brought to the floor. And the punishment for violating the rule against secret holds is . . . well, no one knows what it is.

The new Wyden-Grassley proposal, still taking shape, would require senators who want to place a hold on legislation to do so in writing to their party leader. This hold statement would be published two days after the hold is placed, whether or not the measure is on the floor. The Senate should adopt the amendment and, finally, end the secrecy. As Mr. Grassley said, if senators have a problem with a particular proposal or nominee, "they ought to have the guts to go public."