

MARCH 7, 2006

OPINION

Climate shift against pork seen in Congress

To be a leader in Congress, it takes more than just jumping on the bandwagon when the right media wave hits. You have to see troubles ahead and begin seeking solutions long before it is politically convenient. For these reasons, I am pleased to see the debate in Washington finally turn to ethics reform.

In January, the Wall Street Journal quoted the self-professed criminal lobbyist Jack Abramoff; he called the congressional appropriation committees "earmark favor factories."

Before President George W. Bush called for ethical and spending reforms in his recent State of the Union address, and before the Democrat political strategists chose to make this a campaign issue, I worked with my colleagues in both parties last year to find ethical solutions to end the abuses in the earmark process in Washington, D.C.

Before it was fashionable, I began working with my colleague, Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., early last year on bipartisan legislation to reform the earmark process. Last spring, I co-sponsored the Obligation of Funds Transparency Act because I recognized it as a powerful tool to address excessive, unnecessary spending and the cozy relationship lobbyists have with some lawmakers.

Specifically, this legislation prohibits a federal agency from funding earmark projects (also

called pork projects) unless the project is identified in the text of a bill. The current process is set up so these expensive projects are tucked away in a committee report. Unfortunately, committee reports cannot be amended in the House action where everything is on C-SPAN and a matter of public record.

Some lobbyists and lawmakers take advantage of this fact to the detriment of their colleagues and the American taxpayers.

Even worse, these reports are crafted behind the scenes, separate from the bill that is up for a vote, and most lawmakers are unable to get a copy of the report until just a few hours before the vote.

As a result, there are often costly projects that representatives discover days after debate and voting have occurred. Some of these include:

- Please Touch Museum, Philadelphia, Pa.: \$720,000.
- Indoor Rain Forest in Coralville, Iowa: \$50,000.
- University of Hawaii Documentary Film Production: \$200,000.
- Summer Arts Festival, Fairbanks, Alaska.: \$150,000

If anybody is interested in learning about the gross abuses used in committee reports, a quick glance will show hundreds of pages with pork projects that are often handwritten on the narrow margins. It's literally a matter of scratching out a paragraph here and inserting pork-laden projects.

The earmark process lacks necessary transparency for an ethical, accountable government. Lobbyists arrogantly tout this to their clients, and some lawmakers willingly oblige them. By mak-

ing sure only the projects listed in the bill, and not a committee report loaded with pork, the process will face more critical review and will be held to a higher standard.

Additionally, I am teaming up with Democrat Rep. Mark Udall to introduce the SLICE Act (Stimulating Leadership in Cutting Expenditures). This bill gives Congress and the president tools to reduce corrupt spending by authorizing the president to identify projects he thinks should be cut; Congress is then required to vote on them within 15 days.

Currently, if the president proposes a specific cut, Congress can simply ignore him. However, by instituting the threat of an up or down vote in the House and Senate, lobbyists are less likely to push such egregious spending items and lawmakers will be forced to use taxpayer dollars more responsibly.

In his recent address to the nation, President Bush called on Congress to grant him line-item veto power that would allow him to strike spending provisions from legislation prior to signing the bill into law. Recently, I sent a letter to the White House urging the president to strongly consider the veto powers within the SLICE Act.

I am pleased to see the climate is finally changing in Washington. It is not too often you get a real chance to make lasting reforms to the federal spending process. There are more members of Congress joining the ranks and calling for greater accountability. This is critical because sunshine is the best disinfectant for abusive spending.

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Guest columnist

