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Congress - Sacred Cows and Revered Rodents

David Baumann ([Email this author](#))

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Punxsutawney Phil cannot speak -- he's a groundhog, after all -- but the mayor of his hometown can talk. And he isn't shy about unloading on Rep. **Jeff Flake**, R-Ariz., for ridiculing the \$100,000 in federal funds this small Pennsylvania borough received in 2004 for a weather museum.

"I consider it a cheap shot," Mayor Jim Wehrle told *National Journal*. Wehrle respects what Flake is trying to do in his crusade of "shame and ridicule" against earmarks. But in this case, the mayor said, the *Arizona Republican* didn't have all the facts. The Punxsutawney Weather Discovery Center has been not only a boost for local tourism but also a source of information about meteorology, Wehrle said. "On this particular issue, I think he made a mistake."

Wehrle isn't the only one who's irritated. Other boosters of the weather center were so incensed that they took Phil to Washington in 2004, gaining publicity as far away as Australia. "That's how bad it is around here -- when you bring a rodent down to the Capitol," Flake said last week, recalling the event.

As the House's chief critic of earmarks, Flake is a thorn in the side of appropriators, who take pride in doling out projects to members. But that's not the only reason he gets noticed. Flake favors a free-trade and open-travel policy with Cuba, which angers hard-line anti-Communists. And he is pushing for a guest-worker program, which makes him an ally of Sen. **Edward Kennedy**, D-Mass. -- not the most popular politician in Goldwater Country.

A member of the conservative Republican Study Committee, Flake is anything but a backbencher. "He arrived broken out of the pack," said Rep. **Mike Pence**, R-Ind., the RSC chairman.

Flake has his share of critics. "He doesn't understand the legislative process very well," grumbled a member of the House Appropriations Committee. Members of the committee have been favorite targets of Flake. "I don't think he's all that effective, because he's not all that focused," the member said. He added that Flake would be more persuasive if he worked "with members who have been here for a

while."

Perhaps Flake's sharpest critics are proponents of term limits. When he was elected in 2000, Flake promised not to serve more than three terms in the House. But after being re-elected last year, Flake announced he would not honor his pledge to retire in 2006 and, instead, would run again. "I think people ought to keep their word," said Paul Jacob, a senior fellow at U.S. Term Limits, a group that pushes term limits.

But for every critic, Flake has a fan. "I'm glad Jeff is in Congress," said Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, who called Flake "courageous" for his earmarks campaign. And Pence added: "He's a rare combination of hardened principle and appealing personality. He was against earmarks before it was cool to be against earmarks. He's been willing to take on the sacred cows in Congress."

Flake, 43, is firmly entrenched in Arizona. He was born in Snowflake -- a town named after his great-great-grandfather and another of its founders -- and his family operated a ranch until this generation. He jokes that one reason he ran for Congress was, "I didn't want to milk cows for the rest of my life." A Mormon, he spent two years as a missionary in South Africa and Zimbabwe -- work that helped prepare him for campaigning. "I knocked on a lot of doors in South Africa and Zimbabwe," he said. "I did the same during my first primary run."

After serving as a missionary, Flake lobbied for African companies; interned in the office of then-Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz.; returned to Africa as executive director of the Foundation for Democracy, which monitored the progress of democracy in Namibia; and in 1998 became executive director of the Goldwater Institute, an Arizona think tank that centered on state policy.

Flake -- and his admirers -- say the eclectic issues he has chosen have a common thread: a desire for limited government. His work abroad made him a fierce free-trader and convinced him that the U.S. should have an open trade and travel policy with Cuba. "We Republicans say we have a consistent foreign policy," he said. However, Flake noted, the U.S. trades with China, another Communist nation, but has no relations with Cuba. "That's one glaring omission," he said. "I just think we ought to be consistent."

DeConcini has traveled to Cuba with Flake. The former senator said that on one trip several people in their group met with Castro, but Flake refused. "He wouldn't let himself be used by the Castro regime," DeConcini said. Flake said he feared that a photo of him with Castro would be used against him.

The Cuba issue has given Flake an opening to work with Democrats. He's developed many alliances in the House gym over basketball

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games, he said. Asked who some of his favorite Democrats are, Flake names Rep. Harold Ford of Tennessee because Ford "passes me the ball."

Flake has also worked with Democrats on immigration reform, an issue that haunted him during a primary campaign in 2004, when opponent Stan Barnes called for strict enforcement of immigration laws. Flake favors a program for guest workers, contending that such laborers are vital to Arizona's economy. He said that his family employed them on its ranch when doing so was legal. Because the workers could cross the border freely, they went home for holidays and other celebrations and did not bring their families back with them. Now, because such crossings are risky, they plan to make the trip only once and bring their families. This influx of additional immigrants places a greater burden on the state's health and education systems, Flake said.

But Flake is best-known for his war against earmarks -- a battle he has fought for several years. "The explosion in earmarks under Republicans completely flies in the face of the principles our party supposedly stands for," Flake said in 2004, when he called for a moratorium on earmarks. When the moratorium was rejected, he said, "We can talk about fiscal responsibility all we want, but as long as Congress continues to dole out billions of dollars in pork-barrel projects every year, nobody is going to take us seriously."

Flake and the state's senior senator, Republican **John McCain**, are so opposed to earmarks that they request none for the state. Arizona Gov. **Janet Napolitano** has said that their refusal to seek money hurts the state. Flake said that three out of five mayors in his district opposed his re-election in 2004, citing his opposition to bringing home money. DeConcini, who was a member of the Appropriations Committee when he was in the Senate, said it is a shame that Flake does not seek money for his district. "He could bring a lot of benefits to Arizona."

Flake is pushing legislation to require that earmarks be placed in the text of legislation, rather than in voluminous committee or conference reports. Once a project is earmarked in a report, it becomes extremely difficult to eliminate.

Even though Flake has worked closely with McCain, he gave some thought to running against him in the 2004 primary -- at the urging of the fiscally conservative Club for Growth. Flake said he enjoyed the attention. "All of us are vain in some respects," he said. "I didn't mind having my name out there." Ultimately, he decided not to run, because "I would have been whipped."

Instead, he broke his term-limits promise and ran for re-election. "It was naive and stupid for me to make such a pledge," Flake said,

discussing the 2000 promise to limit himself to three terms. He said that his broken promise should be a campaign issue. "By all rights, I ought to have an opponent on this issue," he said.

Flake said he may seek higher office sometime, and it appears that he may have his eye on the Governor's Mansion. Washington should become less important, and state governments more important, he contends. "I still maintain that's where the real action ought to be," he said, adding somewhat wistfully, "After being here in a body of 435, there's a lot to be said for being a chief executive."

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