

February 9, 2006
Op-Ed Contributor

Earmarked Men

By JEFF FLAKE

Washington

BACK on the F-Bar Ranch, when I was too young to load the chute, de-horn, vaccinate, hold a hot iron or otherwise make myself useful as my father and older brothers branded calves, I would spend my time collecting "earmarks" — V-shaped pieces of a calf's left ear detached with two swift strokes of a pocketknife. I would stack these earmarks on the fence surrounding the corral as an unofficial tally of our progress.

Well, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Here I am in Congress, again being asked to collect earmarks. Sorry. I've had enough of that.

Earmarking — in which members of Congress secure federal dollars for pork-barrel projects by covertly attaching them to huge spending bills — has become the currency of corruption in Congress. It is not just the rising number of earmarks (more than 15,000 last year — up from around 1,200 a decade ago), or the dollar amount (\$27 billion) that is troubling. More disturbing is that earmarks are used as inducements to get members to sign on to large spending measures. (The disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff was astute when he referred to the House Appropriations Committee as an "earmark favor factory.")

It is no coincidence that the growth of earmarks has paralleled the monstrous increase in overall federal spending. And President Bush's new \$2.77 trillion budget will only set off another frenzy.

When I was first elected, I had visions of participating in the great debates of our time: How can we give the federal government the tools it needs to identify and root out our enemies while maintaining a free society? What tax and trade policies lend themselves to survival and prosperity in a global economy? How do we assert our influence abroad in a manner that enhances our security?

It is not that these policy debates haven't occurred during my time in Congress. They have. But they are diminishing.

In Congress these days, you establish your priorities by getting money for them. When the carefully designed process of authorization, appropriation and oversight is adhered to, these policies and priorities are given a thorough vetting. But earmarking circumvents that cycle: the Appropriations Committee ensures that earmarks escape scrutiny by inserting them into conference reports, largely written behind closed doors.

By the time appropriation bills reach the House or Senate floor, passage by a lopsided margin is virtually assured because every member who got earmarks is obligated to vote for the entire bill.

Further, the scope of debate is substantially narrowed, with even partisan arguments that would otherwise occur hushed as Republicans and Democrats find common cause: protecting their pork.

Earmarks are also making it increasingly difficult for Congress to oversee federal agencies. It's hypocritical for us to criticize the Defense Department for not providing body armor when we earmark growing portions of its budget for items like a genomics research project at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan.

Solving the earmark problem will require transparency — a requirement that earmarks be included in the actual text of legislation (where they can be seen and challenged) rather than hidden in committee and conference reports. I've introduced such legislation in the House and my Arizona Republican colleague John McCain has introduced companion legislation in the Senate. Debate on these measures should begin as soon as possible.

During my last few years on the F-Bar we stopped earmarking our calves altogether. We concluded that a brand on the left side was sufficient, and that the earmark simply marred an otherwise healthy critter. Here's hoping we reach the same conclusion in Congress.

Jeff Flake is a Republican representative from Arizona.