



THE VIEW

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CONGRESSIONAL EARMARK: A DIFFERENT VIEW BY MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

The federal budgeting season and the recent flurry of activity surrounding retirements in the Mississippi Congressional delegation drive the need to revisit an old issue – the propriety or lack thereof of Congressional earmarks. For purposes of this discussion an earmark may be defined as the directing of a specifically defined appropriation toward a specific jurisdiction for a specific purpose. To give this discussion some context a review of events and news stories of the past couple of weeks would be in order.

On November 17, 2007 Mississippi's senior Senator Thad Cochran announced that he had decided to stay for another six-year Senate term. A collective sigh of relief could be clearly heard throughout the hinterlands of Mississippi that the ranking member of the Senate appropriations committee had decided to stay on the job. Such influence takes decades to replicate. Earlier, Mississippi's Third District Congressman Chip Pickering announced that he would be leaving the United States House of Representatives to spend more time with and to pursue interests in behalf of his family. Then in a surprise to everyone, Mississippi's junior Senator and Senate Minority Whip Trent Lott announced his retirement at the end of the year. Although the rumor mill has been running white hot regarding these events, the awareness has set in that the plug is about to be pulled on a significant amount of Mississippi's power in Washington. In order to understand the importance of this one must not forget that Senator Cochran is one of the leaders in steering federal earmarks into the federal budget.

Many are critical of the existence of earmarks in the federal budget. There are others who offer a different perspective. It has been said time and again lately that Mississippians over the course of their political history have understood that they would never have great political power based on sheer numbers of people. Thus, seniority and years of collaboration were the best route to political influence for Mississippians in the Congressional delegation. Once there the expectation is that one who has reached the apex of the appropriations process would be a significant advocate for the state and indeed for the entire country. The latter stance would mean putting Mississippi in a position to be seen as a benefit to the nation as a whole. Few who have ever served Mississippi have done so as capably as Senator Thad Cochran. That he has made the case time and again for the need and indeed the advantages to be gained in spending federal dollars in Mississippi should be worn as a badge of honor.

The truth about earmarks in the federal budget is that they represent one of the more “democratizing” influences available to Congress. The reality that they represent a miniscule part of the overall budget often gets lost in the rhetoric employed by their critics. In fact, according to a recent report by the Center for American Progress, discretionary spending represents about a third of the federal budget and earmarks comprise less than two percent of that third of the entire budget. A cursory examination of the distribution of the over 6,000 earmarks clearly demonstrates the many valuable and, for the most part, necessary uses to which these dollars are directed. This is perhaps even more the case for rural states like Mississippi than for those states with broader, more robust tax bases. Public works projects that enhance industrial parks and transportation facilities offer hope for job creation and access to world markets. The ability for capable scientists on the campuses of our Universities and the University Medical Center to work in buildings furnished with the most modern equipment helps to level the playing field in the highly competitive area of academic research. The process of gaining funding in this way is an arduous one, and one in which a clear case must be made as to the potential benefits of a funded project. More often than not, a project funded via the earmark route meets an obvious and immediate need. If earmarks were eliminated from the federal budget states like Mississippi would bear the brunt of the negative impact. Senator Cochran and Congressman Roger Wicker on the appropriations committee in the House have time and again stepped up to make the case that dollars spent in Mississippi are dollars well spent. Improvements in local airports, local highways, recreation facilities and research infrastructure just to name a few categories lead directly to jobs and expansions of local tax bases.



It is a credit to Mississippians that they understand their role in helping build careers in the United States House and Senate that benefit the state. It is hard to imagine doing without the advantages created by appropriations giants such as Congressman Jamie Whitten, Senator John C. Stennis and now Senator Thad Cochran, Congressman Roger Wicker and the rest of the Mississippi Congressional delegation. Their actions have clearly demonstrated their faith in the abilities of Mississippians to deliver value for federal dollars expended within the borders of their home state.

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William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

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