



THE VIEW

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HERE WE GO AGAIN: EARMARKS REVISITED

BY

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It seems as though each year at this stage of the federal budgeting process my phone rings off the hook with someone wishing to complain about Congress and earmarks, or put more bluntly – pork barrel spending. Once again I feel compelled to attempt to redirect their thinking.

Political pundits of both the liberal and conservative persuasions, as well as members of the minority party in Congress, have wasted no time in setting about the task of spinning the numbers in their most eye-popping ways. They spare no drama in repeating the news that the proposed budget for the remainder of 2009, as presented by the new Obama administration, is \$410 billion. Furthermore, they tell of the “startling” \$7.7 billion consumed by the almost 9,000 earmarks embedded in this budget. As one might expect, the partisan anger is palpable. Suddenly everyone is aghast over the profligacy of Senators and Representatives from states other than their own.

Amazingly, there are some pieces of contextual information that don’t serve the purposes of those in the media and the political opposition who are striving to elevate the shock value. These are rarely presented. For example, the \$7.7 billion represents between 1 percent and 2 percent of the entire federal budget. Thus, if one considers the fact that for a mere 1.5 percent of the federal budget Congress can spread 9,000 highly focused projects across all 50 states in the union then this use of federal dollars suddenly seems like one of the most efficient things that our national representative body can accomplish.

Many have asked indigently, “How dare they engage in such spending?” Perhaps a quick review of the Constitutional powers of the legislative branch is in order. Section 8 of the United States Constitution states that “Congress shall have the Power To lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts, and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defense and general Welfare of the United States...” Similar language appears again in the 16th Amendment which clarified the “Status of the Income Tax.” Thus, like it or not, Congress has the responsibility to raise revenues and decide how they are spent. Ever since a horse could carry a Senator or Representative to Washington the expectation has been that the

states doing the sending out of these emissaries would participate in the work of the nation's government and that their representatives would not forget who sent them.

There are several reasons why this process works, particularly for a state like Mississippi. First, there is the ability to focus clearly and specifically on a problem and its particular solutions that eludes the problem solvers if the money is appropriated with a national view. Anyone who has ever been a recipient of an earmark knows that in virtually every instance a persuasive case must be made for the accomplishments that would be made possible by such an appropriation. Secondly, a perusal of a list of earmarks makes it apparent that many, if not a majority, of the earmarks go to rural areas. Evidence abounds that our nation's rural areas, and particularly those in Mississippi, are experiencing great needs, but lack the resources to address those needs or to compete for dollars on a national basis. A similar picture can be painted for university-based research. Mississippi's universities house a number of excellent scientists performing cutting-edge research. Like it or not, Mississippi and other rural states suffer from negative stereotypes held by less informed grant decision makers. With research, the "proof is in the pudding," and often a specifically targeted Congressional appropriation is the only way to accomplish such high-priced research activities. If the dollars are available, Mississippi scientists can compete with anyone.

Mississippi has long benefited from sending highly capable House and Senate members to Washington for term after seniority-building term. Stories abound in rural north Mississippi of Congressman Jamie Whitten's tireless efforts to bring projects to that area that held promise to improve the lives of his constituents. Senator John Stennis chaired the appropriations committee on the Senate side, and like Congressman Whitten, Senator Stennis never once apologized for delivering for the people of Mississippi.

Now Senator Thad Cochran has in the past and continues to this day to fight the good fight in the appropriations arena in behalf of his home state. Senator Roger Wicker has joined him after cutting his appropriations teeth in the House. Congressman Bennie Thompson continues to gain status and seniority, and daily becomes more valuable in the appropriations process. Congressman Childers battled through four elections to earn the right to follow Wicker in trying to fill Congressman Whitten's shoes. Republican Greg Harper faces the task of blending the expectations held by Mississippians as one who "brings home the bacon" while keeping his party leadership happy. Perhaps he may take lessons from Democrat Gene Taylor who often finds himself at odds with his party's leaders.

In summary, Mississippians should not let themselves be fooled by all of the rhetoric. Every dollar that the members of our Congressional delegation fail to bring home to Mississippi will simply go to the worthy projects in another state. We should be thankful for their efforts and reward them by accomplishing more with these resources than any other state in the nation.



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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.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

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