

KeyOpinion

'Earmarks' of Defeat

Richard L. Hershatter
Contributing Columnist

**Before a politician is elected,
He needs to seek the funds for a campaign;
All donors should be carefully selected,
In order to avoid illicit gain.**

The media has had a field day, salivating over the details of "l'affaire Harris," shedding crocodile tears and waxing indignant over the fact that the U.S. Senate candidate personally accepted a bundle of checks from a contractor far above the legal limit allowed from any individual.

The contractor in question also promised, during dinner, to promote a fundraiser on Ms. Harris' behalf. All he wanted — not, mind you, as a quid pro quo — was the insertion of an "earmark" of \$10 million in a larger appropriations bill, to finance a naval intelligence facility in Sarasota County.

Congresswoman Harris complied, moving the item up near the top of her "earmark list," but it failed to gain acceptance.

The same contractor took a similar route with a Congressman from Virginia, but crossed the line from attempted bribery to actual bribery with California Representative Randy "Duke" Cunningham, a former war-time hero and fighter pilot, whose greedy grasp garnered millions of dollars for his personal use, before he was caught and sentenced to a Federal prison.

Much has been made of the corrupting influence of favor-seeking lobbyists and the insidious need for ever-increasing amounts of money to finance television and newspaper advertising in pursuit of office.

In an article entitled "Here's Congress," by fellow columnist Tom Burgum several weeks ago, the point was made that all members of that body, of whatever party, are exposed to intense pressure from lobbyists representing special interests.

What tends to get lost in the shuf-

fle, however, is the invidious practice of "earmarking" itself, which enables lawmakers, practically anonymously, to corral millions, if not billions, of taxpayer dollars for favored "pork" projects.

There is a television commercial extolling the consumption of pork at the dinner table, using the slogan: "Pork — the other white meat."

To a congressman, however, "pork" represents red meat. It enables him or her to return to the home district and proclaim: "See what I got for you! Millions for such needed projects, such as a bridge to nowhere or a statue of the state's governor. And it doesn't cost us a dime — it all comes from far-away Washington."

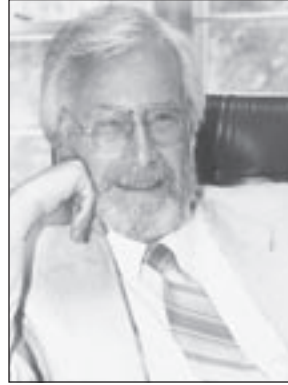
The system leads to enormous runaway expenditures — what grandmother used to call "spending yem's gelt," which, loosely translated, is "other people's money."

It's almost a sickness with politicians, whether on a national or state level. By adding so-called "earmark" requests to larger, sometimes unrelated, appropriation measures, they are able to sneak through budget-busting, often irresponsible expenditures, without having to take responsibility for the consequences.

And the problem is that after a year or so in office, they all succumb to the temptation.

They become like children in a sandbox, tossing sand in all directions, except that in the case of the U.S. Congress, it is not sand they're throwing, it's dollars, and much of it is wasted.

Lord Acton was correct when he said that power corrupts. It is a sad fact that representatives and senators alike have used their power to create a system where



they have elevated themselves into a class apart, with special lifetime perks and benefits far surpassing anything available to the voters who put them there.

For example, Congress long ago decreed that the Social Security system was all right for the rest of us, but for themselves they voted pension benefits far above those accorded to the average taxpayer, and without the necessity of a personal contribution to its cost.

Individual legislators become inured to the wrongness of what is going on, because "everybody's doing it, so it must be all right."

It is not all right, and it has created a situation where the nation's economy has changed from healthy surpluses to historic deficits.

Each year the government is required to increase the permissible debt limit, and it recently raised it to nearly \$9 trillion. It is now at the point where the burden of repaying the borrowed funds is beyond the capabilities of our children. It will fall upon our grandchildren and possibly their children to bring the nation back to solvency.

The system of secret earmarking needs to be reformed, so that each item is made public, including authorship, at the time of submission. That, at least, would provide some degree of accountability, which should, in turn, cause the introducer of each request to exercise caution.

**The time has come to introduce some measures,
With spending curbs that seek to change the way**

The Congress works to spend the nation's treasures;

Corrections must be made without delay.

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Oil and the Titanic Congress

Tom Burgum
Contributing Columnist

The prevailing joke at the Democratic Club in Washington, DC last week was, "What is the difference between the Congressional response to oil prices and the Titanic?" The answer was instructive, "At least the Titanic was trying to miss the iceberg." Like much humor, there is more than a grain of truth in the attempt at humor.

Heaven only knows what Congress is thinking if they are actually trying to miss the oil-price iceberg. A Wall Street Journal editorial put it well, "Let's hope the folks who make those cable-TV videos of loopy college kids vamping on spring break are headed for Capitol Hill. The Members aren't yet taking their shirts off in response to higher gasoline prices, but give them time. They're certainly pulling enough other stunts to laugh at."

The Republicans win first prize for the loopiest idea — the \$100 rebate. Whoopee, who knows how they came up with that one? Someone in the Republican Caucus must have said, "Maybe if we give them a hundred dollars they won't be so mad at us." They obviously forgot Jimmy Carter's attempt to bribe the electorate with a \$50 rebate in 1977. That really worked, didn't it?

Senator Arlen Specter (R-Penn.) just couldn't stay out of it and led his Judiciary Committee in a bipartisan vote to create a new federal and state task force to investigate information sharing among oil companies. Just what Specter and his cohorts expect to accomplish with that is anyone's guess. The oil companies are investigated even more than current Republican leaders without any actionable cause.

The Washington Post reported House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) demanded the Federal Trade Commission and Justice Department investigate price fixing and gouging. Specter, busy posturing as always wanted stricter anti-trust laws for oil companies and a windfall profits tax. Hastert also found time to say he finds the compensation for certain executives "unconscionable." He offered no solution, probably because there is none.

First prize in the "grandstanding" contest must go to Specter and the Senate Judiciary Committee. They will allow lawsuits against OPEC for fixing oil prices and controlling output. This will certainly sober up Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who, according to the Washington Post, thinks oil prices are too low. This bit of bipartisan grandstanding would be despicable if it weren't so laughable. The only good news is the idea is so ridiculous it won't anger, only confuse, the oil-producing countries.

The sad secret is that OPEC is not to blame, or at least, is not the entity principally responsible for this mess. For that, we must look to our own Congress. According to the Wall Street Journal, "A decent portion of the latest run-up in gas prices — and the entire cause of recent spot shortages — is the direct result of the energy bill Congress passed last summer. That self-serving legislation handed Congress's friends in the ethanol lobby a mandate that forces drivers to use 7.5 billion gallons annually of that oxygenate by 2012." A former lobbyist for alcohol producers pointed out the problem with the Congressional mandate. "We can't produce enough alcohol to make up for the oxygenate, MTBE, now being taken off the market due to environmental concerns. Even though Congress originally mandated the use of this oxygenate, Congress bowed to the trial lawyers lobby and refused to provide legal immunity from environmental lawsuits. Alcohol now costs about \$2.85 a gallon and the price is going up. Even this doesn't cover the cost of using alcohol. Alcohol can't be shipped through pipelines. It must be delivered by rail or truck, adding significant cost to the consumer." He then added, "It is questionable whether the use of alcohol will reduce our dependence on oil. Studies in the '70s found that it takes almost a gal-



lon of oil to produce and deliver one gallon of alcohol." President Bush continues to violate his own free trade policies by refusing to back removal of the 49-cent import tax on Brazilian alcohol. Even this modest step would relieve price and supply pressures on alcohol but Bush won't ask Congress and Congress, obviously in bed with the alcohol lobby, probably wouldn't agree.

The Democrats can't get away with just standing there and pointing fingers at the bumbling Republicans. Schumer, when on MSNBC, asked, "If \$75-per-barrel oil and a \$3-dollar average for a gallon of gasoline isn't a wakeup call, then what is?" Surely Schumer has set a record in the domain of the ridiculous and the contemptible. Schumer and his fellow Democrats have opposed and filibustered every attempt in the last 20 years to increase domestic production. Heaven forbid we should take a few acres out of the Artic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), or drill in the continental shelf, or build a few more platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. ANWR was authorized in 1995 but Bill Clinton vetoed the legislation. The reason he gave was that the oil wouldn't be ready for 10 years. Oops, we could use it now, couldn't we? Fortunately this tactic didn't work in the '70s when the Alaskan pipeline was being debated. This initiative survived and now supplies over a million barrels a day.

The dirty secret is that the Democratic Party is held hostage by various interest groups, including the environmental lobby in Washington. The web sites of these groups have long complained about the evils of fossil fuels, the need for conservation promoted by much higher prices for gasoline. Tia Nelson, daughter of the founder of Earth Day, Gaylord Nelson, was honest during the Earth Day observances and said she wanted the prices to go well over \$3 a gallon. Now the Democrats seem to have taken the position that the way to reduce prices is to reduce supply in the face of increasing demand but, the Democratic members are not that ignorant. Anyone working Capitol Hill knows many Democrats, against their better judgment, vote against developing

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