

[> BACK](#) [> PRINT](#)

Rep. Flake On Cutting Congressional Pork

Nov. 5, 2006

(CBS) Buried in the fine print is \$70 billion, give or take a billion or two. It is one subject members of Congress don't like talking about: earmarks. The \$70 billion covers just this year's crop of earmarks. Earmarks designate money for a multitude of hometown projects that may also benefit lobbyists and the industries they represent. Most of them are buried in the fine print of legislation and are seldom debated. Many say they're one of Congress's dirty little secrets, that a good part of that \$70 billion is pork – government waste at its worst.

As **correspondent Morley Safer** reports, past examples include the \$223 million "bridge to nowhere" in Alaska, which almost got approved, and half a million for a teapot museum in North Carolina, which did.

This story is about one congressman's mission to end earmarks that has pitted him against the House, in particular against members of his own party.

"Everyone bears some blame here but Republicans are going to be blamed disproportionately. And then I have to say we deserve it, because we've been in charge," says Rep. Jeff Flake, a conservative Republican from Arizona.

On weekends at his home outside Phoenix, you can find him on the trampoline with his kids. But back in Washington, you'll find him on the floor of the House, trying to bounce some earmarks out of the federal budget, but with much less success.

"This process of challenging earmarks on the floor is often described as tilting at windmills, so I suppose it is only proper that we start today with an earmark for the wind demonstration project," Flake says on the floor of the House.

Rep. Flake is challenging \$6 million for windmills to generate power on military bases, \$500,000 for a swimming pool in Banning, Calif., \$1 million to promote tourism in Kentucky, \$750,000 for a new building at the Los Angeles County Fair, \$1.5 million for a William Faulkner Museum in Mississippi. And he challenges a particularly mysterious item: \$600,000 for the Center of End of Life Electronics in West Virginia.

It sounds like something that might have something to do with either euthanasia or capital punishment and it was a mystery to the congressman as well: "We had a hard time. We thought it was computers for seniors. It wasn't. It was basically mining the parts that are still usable out of old computers," Rep. Flake explains.

In essence, the center would recycle parts.

As they work their way through Congress, earmarks are so shrouded in secrecy you often can't tell who benefits from them, who sponsors them, or why.

"The vast majority of them we have no idea. Sometimes you'll see a press release when somebody's taking a victory lap. Some of them don't want anyone to know ever that they got that earmark, other than the lobbyist that they got it for," Flake tells Safer.

It's a process the Founding Fathers warned us about from the very beginning.

"Jefferson actually was very prescient about it and said it was gonna be a mad scramble to see who can waste the most money in their state," explains Leslie Paige, who studies the workings of Congress for the non-partisan group Citizens Against Government Waste. For lawmakers, she says, earmarks serve another function: you show me yours, I'll show you mine.

"You want me to vote for your Medicare bill? What do you want for it? You know? And that actually has happened, where there's been a lot of log rolling and horse trading to get bills through that they can't get through any other way," she explains.

On the floor of the House, Jeff Flake has managed to smoko out the authors of a few earmarks. But as you might expect, his efforts have gotten him in trouble with just about everybody.

"Doggone it, I'm not gonna let somebody stand up here in total and complete ignorance and spout off a bunch of gobbledygook," Rep. Curt Weldon fired at his fellow Republican.

Weldon of Pennsylvania let Flake have it for questioning \$4 million to help the rotorcraft industry. "Don't stand up on the floor and make stupid allegations because you want a headline about cutting waste. This is not waste," Weldon argued.

To Democrat Jose Serrano of New York, it was bad enough when Flake challenged \$150,000 to fix the plumbing and wiring at some Italian markets in the Bronx.

"I would argue this is one cannoli the taxpayer doesn't want to take a bite of," Flake told his fellow lawmakers.

But when Flake tried to cut \$300,000 for the Bronx Council on the Arts, Serrano gave him the old Bronx cheer. "The more you get up on these, Sir, the more I realize that you do not know what you are talking about. I make no excuses about the fact that I earmark dollars to go in the poorest congressional district in the nation, which is situated in the richest city on earth," Serrano said, addressing Flake.

There were already some 13,000 earmarks this year alone, compared to only 4,000 12 years ago. And it's no accident that the explosive growth in earmarks parallels the explosive growth of lobbyists in Washington.

"Many of the earmark request forms are actually filled out by lobbyists and then just turned in by the member's staff to the appropriations committee," Flake explains.

"And a good part of the time, as you say, it's just rubber stamped by the congressmen?" Safer asks.

"Yes. Unfortunately, yes," Rep. Flake replies.

"And he's got his hand out for some campaign contributions? Correct?" Safer asks.

"Well, yes," Flake says. "Many times the same lobbyists who are requesting these earmarks will then host fundraisers for a member of Congress."

In the House, Flake reminded his colleagues of one lobbyist they'd just as soon forget. "Jack Abramoff reportedly referred to the appropriations committee as an 'earmark favor factory,'" he said.

Abramoff pled guilty to fraud and corruption.

And there's Randy Cunningham, the Republican congressman from California who did that increasingly popular dance, the perp walk, right into jail for taking bribes from defense contractors.

Basically, Flake accused him of selling earmarks. "He was. In fact, they found papers where he had listed how much he'd demanded for each earmark," he explains.

"Without naming names, do you think there're other people still in the Congress who are doing that to one degree or another?" Safer asks.

"To one degree or another, yes. I don't believe there are any as blatant as Randy Cunningham was," Flake says.

So who is this Don Quixote, tilting at his colleagues' windmills? Jeff Flake grew up in Snowflake, Ariz. A town named for two Mormon pioneers: Erastus Snow and Jeff's great-great grandfather Bill Flake.

"He grew up as a cowboy. He knows how to ride horses," says the congressman's uncle Jeff Flake. He says the cowboy life taught Jeff some skills he'd find handy as a politician.

"He knows how to round up cattle and knows how to stay out of their way. And knows how to get in and mix it up with them when he needs to," his uncle explains.

And if there's a certain missionary zeal in Jeff Flake, it's no accident. In the Mormon tradition, as a young man, he did missionary work in Africa.

Asked if the few years he spent as a missionary shaped him in any ways as a politician, Flake says, "Yes. For one, I think as a missionary you gotta be stubborn. And you gotta try to be persuasive."

He represents a fast-growing Sunbelt state that ironically owes its modern existence to the billions in federal dollars spent to move water from the Colorado River to the cities. It's a fact his opponents often remind him of; Flake counters that the central Arizona water project wasn't an earmark, and was openly debated.

"The truth is I don't think there was any project that was under more scrutiny, that took more years of authorization and debates, and open debates. Nothing in secrecy. And that's how it should be," he argues.

"Earmarks can be used wisely. But too often as not they're used unwisely. And that's what Jeff's trying to do away with," says Jeff's uncle Jake Flake.

It's excellent in theory, but in practice, when uncle Jake, who's an Arizona state senator, wanted \$3 million of federal money for a bridge over Tonto Creek, he didn't even bother to ask his nephew, and got it instead from another congressman.

"I think it's something that we legitimately need and deserve. But the only way we have to get them now is by earmarks," Jake Flake explains.

And largely because of Jeff Flake's refusal to trade in earmarks, three out of the five mayors in his home district opposed his re-election two years ago.

"They said he's not bringing home the bacon. Let's get rid of him. But they found out quickly that you know, for every one who stops me on the street and says 'Why don't you give money for this museum or this library?' You know, you have a hundred saying 'Atta boy, you know, keep at it,'" Flake says.

And this November, he's so popular the Democrats aren't even opposing him.

Keeping at it on the House floor, Flake mentions Punxatawney while talking about a proposed weather museum there. Punxatawney is the home of that annual ritual, Groundhog Day. It's something the gentleman from Arizona can relate to, as time and again, he rises to demand certain earmarks be cut.

Thirty-nine times he tried to shoot down earmarks, and 39 times he was voted down - with a vengeance.

He lost every one of them. Asked why he continues, Rep. Flake says, "Somebody's gotta do something."

"But you've tried everything. You've tried to embarrass them. They're un-embarrassable, correct?" Safer asks.

"We're tough to shame. I've found that out. It's very tough to shame us any more," the congressman replies.

Jeff Flake's story is a familiar one, immortalized 67 years ago in the film "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington," starring Jimmy Stewart, who portrayed a young idealist who runs up against the real Washington world of fat cats, special interests and rotten apples.

In the movie, of course, Stewart eventually wins. In reality, says Jeff Flake, many of his fellow lawmakers would like to join his lost cause. If only the other guy would step forward first.

"I have to tell you that a lot of them, a lot of them are sick of this game. They had higher aspirations when they were elected. And so privately they're cheering and saying, 'I hope he changes the system, because I'm tired of it,'" Flake says.

Maybe the system will change one day. But just like that other movie, "Groundhog Day," the more you try to change things, the more they stay the same.

Produced By David Browning

©MMVI, CBS Broadcasting Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[> Feedback](#) [> Terms of Service](#) [> Privacy Statement](#)