

*by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Maybe President Bush did betray his bias for the military over the economically distressed in his choice of vetoes last week. He sent back a \$606 billion spending bill funding education, health and labor programs but signed a \$471 billion defense appropriations bill funding the Pentagon, minus Afghanistan and Iraq operations.

But Congress gave him an opening so large that any president would feel tempted to drive a veto truck through. That would be 2,000 earmarks, including money for a library and museum honoring first ladies, the Charles B. Rangel Center for Public Service and the Thad Cochran Research Center.

The library and museum is courtesy of Rep. Ralph Regula, R-Ohio - the library founded by his wife and directed by his daughter, according to a New York Times article last week.

The president says he vetoed the non-military bill because it overshot what he wanted to spend. Yet he approved the military bill, though its spending represented an even larger increase. He seems to have very much found his budget outrage and veto pen with a Democratic Congress that he didn't much find when he had a big-spending GOP Congress to work with. So it's clear that part of his motivation is political.

That doesn't mean that Congress has to make it easy. After promising to curtail the practice of earmarks, it still managed to find a home for 2,000 of them in this bill. Perhaps there are even some in the bill that most folks would deem as worthy. But that isn't the point. Earmarks - pork to the rest of us - represent a longstanding congressional practice through its power of the purse to micromanage. Federal agencies and the president ask for a certain amount, and contained in what Congress sends back to them are funds directed toward specific projects, which often just happen to be in the districts of well-connected members of Congress.

Some put a high-minded constitutional spin on this - Congress, as opposed to faceless bureaucrats, being best able to ascertain the needs and wants of Americans. Direct democracy, in other words.

Bunk.

Pork is too often about desires of the well-favored put to the front of the line, without adequate vetting or skepticism. And earmarks might also be viewed as tantamount to a lobbyists/consultants employment security act.

So here's a suggestion. Since the domestic spending bill doesn't seem to have the votes to be veto-proof, strip out the pork. If nothing else, this would test whether the president's motivation is fiscal or purely political.

Reprinted from The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel â€œ CNS.

*Business as usual by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*