Pelosi's failed vow

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

It's now been nearly 14 months since Rep. Nancy Pelosi, then incoming speaker of the House, vowed to lead "the most honest" and "most ethical" Congress ever. The San Francisco Democrat's bold declaration on election night 2006 was welcomed by voters whose anger over lawmakers' scandals and crimes led them to end Republicans' control of both the House and the Senate.

Pelosi acknowledged the daunting task she faced, given legislators' bipartisan addiction to "earmarks." These appropriations - secured and approved with little scrutiny, and often directed to campaign contributors - played a key role in the rise of a pervasive culture of corruption. But she said accepting the status quo was no longer an option.

Within days, however, Pelosi's bona fides as a reformer came into doubt when she pushed for Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., to be House majority leader. But elevating a lawmaker who had been a fixture for a quarter-century on any list of sleaziest congressmen was too much for Pelosi's House colleagues, who instead chose Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., for the post.

So which was the real Pelosi: the firebrand reformer or the pal of the corner-cutters? As the House begins its 2008 session this month, it sure looks like the latter. While Pelosi's efforts to crack down on lobbying transgressions were successful, earmarks remain out of control, with a stunning 11,000-plus slipped into bills approved in 2007.

The number was down from the 13,000 seen in 2006, and so was the total cost. But in terms of outrageousness, 2007 was as bad as ever - with Murtha (who else?) leading the way. The Washington Post last week detailed how Murtha and his allies continued to funnel money to the Murtha-created National Defense Center for Environmental Excellence, ostensibly to help the Pentagon develop anti-pollution technology. But despite at least $671 million in federal funding since 1991, little of the center's work has panned out.

Things get murkier still. The center is managed by another Murtha creation - Concurrent Technologies - which gets about $200 million annually from the Pentagon, and which also has a skimpy track record. The weird kicker: Concurrent is registered as a tax-exempt charity.

Investigations continue, but it is plain that something shady is going on here. We doubt it's a coincidence that Murtha chairs the House's defense appropriations subcommittee. Given that Murtha last year secured $163 million in earmarks - the most of any House member - he may well have several more such dubious enterprises awaiting discovery.

What about Hoyer, the supposed white knight in the late 2006 majority leader fight? In 2007, he slipped in $89 million in earmarks.

So much for Nancy Pelosi's grand rhetoric. A different party may be calling the shots, but the status quo remains.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune. â€“ CNS.

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