

Shame on Pelosi

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Democrats wasted no time after their takeover of Congress in November in declaring a new era of responsible government. Party leaders said earmarks and massive, blithe pork-barrel spending would be a thing of the past. "We promise the most honest, most open, most ethical Congress in history," declared House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Initially, Democrats seemed to live up to their grand talk. To the amazement of many, incoming Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert Byrd - the West Virginia Democrat who may be the biggest pork abuser of all - joined with incoming House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey to vow there would be no new earmarks until the next fiscal year began on Oct. 1.

This was all wonderful, welcome and overdue. Federal spending has been out of control since the final years of the Clinton administration. While earmarks and pork are only a relatively small part of the reason why, controlling them would be a welcome sign of a newly sober, adult attitude on Congress' part.

Too bad it was all a charade. What's going on this week in the House is as appalling an exercise in pork-politics vote-buying as anything seen when Republicans Dennis Hastert and Tom DeLay were in control - especially because the vote-buying involves an issue of the utmost gravity.

Weeks ago, Pelosi proposed attaching a requirement that U.S. troops come home from Iraq before September 2008 to an emergency \$100 billion military appropriations bill. When it became apparent she didn't have enough votes, she responded by adding \$24 billion in pork, often in the form of agricultural subsidies used to win over rural Democratic lawmakers who tend to be more deferential on war policy.

This is disgusting. That Pelosi insists this extra spending doesn't qualify as pork is bad enough. But the idea that taxpayer funds are being doled out by the multibillion for unrelated domestic programs to influence a profoundly important vote on Iraq should offend everyone. What does it say for the dozens of House members that this tactic apparently swayed? That on any issue, there is a price at which their convictions are for sale?

"A great nation deserves better," Rep. Jeb Hensarling, R-Texas, said yesterday as the House debated the \$124 billion spending measure. He's absolutely right. In 2004, a unanimous House ethics committee voted to rebuke then-Majority Leader DeLay for his tactics in attempting to persuade Rep. Nick Smith, R-Mich., to support a 2003 bill adding prescription-drug benefits to Medicare. DeLay's offense, according to the official panel report: "DeLay offered to endorse Rep. Smith's son (to replace him after he retired) in exchange for Rep. Smith's vote in favor of the Medicare bill."

If that merits a formal rebuke, trying to use \$24 billion in taxpayer money to sway a vote on war policy deserves a prison term.

A final House vote on the bill is likely today. If Pelosi gets her way, it will be national disgrace. Her tactics could not be less honest, less open or less ethical.

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