

Sleazy as ever

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Given that two ex-GOP are in prison because of earmark scandals and that five sitting House Republicans are now facing earmark-related federal investigations, viewing earmark abuse as mostly a GOP phenomenon makes superficial sense. But with each passing month, it becomes more obvious that congressional earmarking - lawmakers' practice of slipping millions for favored programs and projects into spending bills - is as out of control now under Democrats as it used to be under Republicans.

This isn't just evident in the fact that legislators made so many earmark requests - 36,000-plus - that House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey says there is no way all can be properly vetted. It is evident in an endless string of anecdotes demonstrating that rank-and-file members of both parties - eager to use earmarks to obtain hometown headlines, contributions or worse - love the disreputable status quo.

Consider a recent exchange on the House floor between Rep. Jeff Flake, the Arizona Republican who is the leading critic of earmarks, and Rep. Peter Visclosky, D-Ind., over a \$1 million earmark for the "Center for Instrumented Critical Infrastructure" being considered by a subcommittee Visclosky chairs. Flake established that Visclosky didn't even know if such a center existed.

It turned out the funding was stealthily included, without documentation, at the request of pork-crazed Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa. But even though staffers could not prove the center existed, the House voted 326-98 against Flake's bid to end its funding.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., vowed in January that only earmarks that met common-sense standards would be approved. Instead, earmarks that meet no standards at all find protection.

Or consider the behavior of the House Intelligence Committee. Last year, panel Democrats complained bitterly when Republicans blocked release of a declassified version of an internal report on how Cunningham was able to trade earmarks for bribes. This year, it turns out the griping was all for show - because those same Democrats are now joining in blocking the report's release. Why? Reportedly because the inquiry detailed a sleazy insider culture of favor-swapping and utter ethical indifference - a bipartisan sleazy insider culture.

In an interview Thursday, Flake sounded a little like Fox Mulder of "The X-Files": He wants to believe, he really does, that leaders such as Obey are sincere when they decry earmarks. But such faith is hard to sustain. "The members are so addicted (to earmarks). They think it's how you get re-elected," Flake said.

When will this attitude change?

"When there are more indictments and more of a taint," he said.

We agree. Happy hunting, FBI. Inspire Congress to finally clean up its

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