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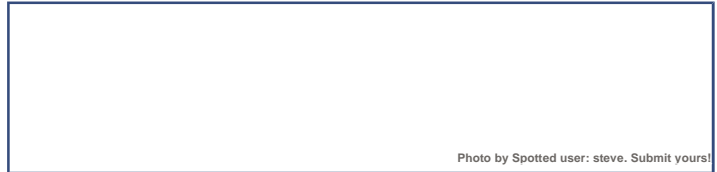


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Wednesday, September 22, 2010
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Miller rides the tail of Reaganomics

By Rich Moniak | Juneau Empire

For Joe Miller, the Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate, targeting wasteful federal spending is his highest priority. He's signed the "Contract From America," which would end all earmarks until Congress balances the federal budget. On the stump, he's promised to end congressional pork even for Alaska. What does this mean for a state economy that's heavily dependent on federal spending? Very little, because earmarks only amount to a penny for every federal dollar arriving on our doorstep.

Miller is correct when he states that during the Bush years, Republicans ushered in the largest expansion of federal spending since 1960s. And spending has grown substantially since President Obama took office. He's also right when he points out that more than one-third of Alaska's economy is derived from federal spending. What he fails to discuss is that more than 40 percent of that is defense spending.

Let's be clear about one thing: The federal budget is broken and has been for many years. For the average American though, it's an accounting system beyond comprehension. It leaves room for enough analytical variations on the national debt to please every political argument, especially for candidates on the campaign trail. But Miller's self described "will and moral courage to stand up to the big spenders" is mostly feel good populist rhetoric.

We've been here before. Thirty years ago, Ronald Reagan rode into office by disparaging the federal budget process during the Carter administration. In Miller's campaign literature, there are enough of quotes from The Gipper to suggest that Reaganomics is the formula to successful fiscal reform. It's a surefire way to build a nostalgic campaign, but the truth is, deficit spending during the Reagan's years was as bad as or worse than Carter's.

In 1982, analyst David Boaz referred to Reaganomics as nothing more than a "new style of rhetoric in Washington" that promised higher taxes and spending every year. At the end of Reagan's presidency, Sheldon L. Richman described him as "the man who would turn things around. But he didn't even try." In fact, a 2004 Cato Institute report titled "The Republican Spending Explosion" reveals that Reagan's discretionary spending in 1985 was higher than in any budget signed by Carter.

These aren't liberals attempting to rewrite history. They all are leading advocates of libertarian philosophies.

Under Reagan's leadership, America witnessed the largest peacetime military budget in history. The 7 percent annual increase in military spending combined with his tax cuts to undermine his pledge to reduce the federal deficit. Twenty years later, George W. Bush followed this kind of fiscal irresponsibility down the same rabbit hole.

Our nation's defense spending has become a pork-laden entitlement program to the CEOs and stockholders of some of the largest corporations in the world. Yes, they provide significant private sector employment opportunities, but in the end, those jobs are just like earmarks as a means to launder taxpayer money back into the economy.

Next to defense spending, earmarks are insignificant. Defining them as broadly as possible, the fiscally conservative Citizens Against Government Waste, or CAGW, claims they amount to "only five tenths of a percent of all federal spending." CAGW reported that Alaska received federal earmarks worth \$322 per person in 2009. Compare that to the U.S. Census Bureau report for the same year which shows we got about \$20,000 per person from the feds, more than \$8,000 of which was from military spending.

Miller focused on earmarks as a way of distinguishing himself from Sen. Lisa Murkowski during the primary, but there's nothing noble about diverting public attention from our real dependency on federal spending. He hasn't blasted President Obama's defense budget, which if passed will be largest since World War II. Money from that sacred cow will continue to roll in, primarily to military bases and thus bolstering the local economies of Alaska's two largest cities.

There is one constitutional conservative willing to tackle the problem of America's bloated military budget. Congressmen Ron Paul, R-Texas, has teamed up with Barney Frank, D-Mass., to propose reducing military spending approximately \$1 trillion over a 10-year period. How much of that money would come out of the pockets of Alaskans may be a question Miller is afraid to ask.

• Moniak is a Juneau resident.

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