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Hoppy's Commentary For Thursday

Talkline Host Hoppy Kercheval

Whenever the subject of cutting federal spending comes up, I think of what West Virginia Congresswoman Shelley Moore Capito once told me casually as we wrapped up an interview.

When I asked her offhandedly what was on her schedule for the rest of the day, she said she had meetings with a number of different constituency groups, and almost all of them wanted money for one thing or another.

Fiscal conservatism is the post-election rage, as well it should be. While Americans have faced down economic challenges, Washington has borrowed and printed its way into unimaginable debt.

There has been no recession in Washington.

Republicans, now influenced by the budget hawks from the Tea Party, want to start down the path toward fiscal responsibility by eliminating earmarks, funds that politicians add to legislation for projects in their home districts.

Earmark defenders argue that the move is more about show than dough. A report last week by the President's Commission on Deficit Reduction said eliminating all earmarks in 2015 would save \$16 billion.

That's about one-tenth of one percent of the national debt of \$13 trillion, mathematically not enough to make a difference.

In addition, earmark supporters contend that not all of this spending is needless pork. For every "bridge to nowhere," there's also a bridge that actually goes somewhere. Constituent groups define earmarks as wasteful spending on somebody else's project.

But earmarks are not just about the dollars for specific projects; they are also used to entice lawmakers to vote for something they might otherwise oppose.

According to an editorial in the Wall Street Journal this week, those earmarks are the spending that "greases the political skids for passing trillion-dollar-plus budget bills. Members get what they want in return for voting "aye" on what the Administration and Congressional leaders want."

The issue is more the culture of spending than the few billion in earmarks that pad the budget.

West Virginia politicians who give up earmarks risk losing some political capital. According

to the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, West Virginia gets a disproportionately large percentage of the earmark pie.

The state receives the second highest percentage of earmark dollars relative to taxes paid of all states and Washington, D.C. Only Mississippi had a higher percentage.

The late Senator Byrd considered pork delivery to his home state a source of pride that was always welcomed by the beneficiaries with praise and votes.

It will not be easy for Washington to give up earmarks. Ribbon cutting has become a sacred right for members of Congress. But Washington has to address the spending addiction.

Just like any addict, recovery starts by taking it one day at a time, or, in the case of Washington spending, one earmark at a time.

User Comments

Posted by **marden08** on 11/18/10 at 9:04 AM

I agree with Mountaineer Bob and Captain 100%. The first cuts, earmarks, may be the most painful for Congress. We need to start now. Substantial real spending cuts should come before any tax increases. Failure to extend the tax cuts on the books now for all income groups will effectively be tax increases.

Clarification the initial loans to help save GM and Chrysler were approved by President Bush as part of the TARP program. President Obama upped the support but the previous administration came to the conclusion that the car companies were too important to fail. Perhaps we should say thank you Presidents Bush and Obama for helping save GM.

Posted by **mountaineer bob** on 11/18/10 at 8:44 AM

This is a good start, but we must do much more and it may hurt us all, but I want the government to focus on cutting costs before they think about raising taxes. Those in WV that have an entitlement mentality begin to get worried when they see cuts in earmarks. Congrats to GM and the hardwork they have put in and to the administration for getting it right. GM and TARP (I believe a Bush thing) worked out well for all concerned, gives you a little faith that sometimes the government can get things right. Seems like it sometimes take a crisis for Washington to do the right thing.

Posted by **TD** on 11/18/10 at 7:33 AM

In case you missed it GM went public today. I for one want to offer a big pat on the back to the administration for saving the company and up to one million jobs nationwide. Good job Pres. Obama!!!

As for earmarks, if Republicans were serious about the deficit they would have a dozen far more substantial offerings than eliminating earmarks. How about we get rid of no bid cost plus contracts, changing the law so the gov't can negotiate prescription drug prices?