

NATIONAL REVIEW

Earmarks Are the Freddy Krueger of D.C.

Trump should make good on his 'drain the swamp' promise and just kill them already.

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If anyone thought that the Trump presidency and Republican control of Congress were going to usher in a new age of fiscal restraint, they are being swiftly disabused of that notion. Already we've seen President Trump float proposals for \$1 trillion in infrastructure spending and rule out reform of our bankrupt entitlement programs, while Congress has passed a budget resolution that adds some \$8 trillion to our federal debt over the next ten years.

But perhaps the best evidence that Washington has not changed its big-spending ways is the continued push by some members of Congress to revive "earmarks."

Republican appropriators already tried this gambit once. Led by Representative Tom Rooney of Florida, they attempted to eliminate the ban on earmarks from House rules shortly after the November election. Fortunately, public opposition spurred the timely intervention of House speaker Paul Ryan, who killed the proposal.

But in Washington, bad ideas never die. Like the latest incarnation of Freddy Krueger, earmarks have risen from the grave and are once again being pushed by the usual suspects, including Rooney and Representatives John Culberson of Texas, Mike Rogers of Alabama, and Mike Kelly of Pennsylvania. The new incarnation, now renamed "line item appropriations," would once again allow representatives to insert specific spending for district projects without subjecting those proposals to full scrutiny. Call it what you will — it is a recipe for pork-barrel spending and corruption.

Of course, earmarks were always a tiny portion of overall federal spending; they reached a peak of \$29 billion in 2006, shortly before being banned. Not that \$29 billion is peanuts, but the real toxicity of earmarks is their use as favors — bribes in another context — to legislators who in exchange support other spending or legislation favored by congressional leaders, especially members of the appropriations committees. This leads to increased overall spending that far exceeds the spending for the earmarks themselves.

Moreover, earmarks are an open invitation to corruption. Recall the case of Republican representative Duke Cunningham in 2006 or, more recently, Democratic representative Chaka

Fattah of Pennsylvania, who both went to prison on federal corruption charges. The lure of earmark money provides an opportunity for bipartisan dishonesty.

In fact, even with the earmark ban in place, the practice hasn't been entirely stamped out. The most recent report from Citizens Against Government Waste (CAGW) noted that there were still 123 earmarks in last year's budget, at a cost to taxpayers of \$5.1 billion. That's an increase of 88.9 percent since 2014. Clearly Congress has not overcome its addiction to pork.

Congressional concern about earmarks is less about who decides on spending than about who gets the credit at reelection time. Of course, supporters of earmarks claim they are merely trying to take back the power of the purse from the executive branch and unelected bureaucrats, who make many spending decisions today. But that hardly excuses the practice of slipping hundreds of pet spending projects into giant appropriations bills, where they are all too likely to go undetected. CAGW reports that all of those 123 earmarks in 2016 were shoehorned into the 887-page Consolidated Appropriations Act.

More significantly, the idea that Congress needs to rescue spending from federal bureaucrats is misleading. For example, in the latest Surface Transportation Bill, traditionally a prime target for earmarks, 92 percent of funding is distributed to the states with limited strings through specific formulas, giving state and local governments the final say over funding decisions. Congressional concern about earmarks is less about who decides on spending than about who gets the credit at reelection time.

During the campaign, Donald Trump famously promised to drain the swamp in Washington. Earmarks, as Senator Jeff Flake (R., Ariz.) points out, are simply "feeding the alligators pork." Or as Jim Banks, the freshman representative from Indiana, puts it, earmarks turn Congress into "a never-ending competition of pay-to-play, a zero-sum game with members wheeling and dealing for bigger slices of the federal pie financed by hardworking taxpayers."

If President Trump is serious about putting a stop to Washington business as usual, he needs to drive a stake through the heart of this bad idea once and for all.

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