

## Congress and the Pork Barrel

By Lee Hamilton

Some years back, I was at a public meeting in Tell City, Indiana, when one of its citizens stood up to chide me and my fellow members of Congress for our devotion to pork-barrel spending. How in good conscience, he wanted to know, could we spend so much of the public's money on frivolous projects designed only to get us re-elected?

My first instinct was to ask the group to step outside. To understand why, you have to know a little about Tell City. It is a small town in southern Indiana, founded by Swiss settlers, not far from where Abraham Lincoln ran a ferry across the mouth of the Anderson River as a young man. What you notice in Tell City, though, is a different and much bigger river: the Ohio, which runs along the edge of its downtown. Indeed, the only thing between the building I was standing in and thousands of cubic feet of water were a few yards of ground and a levee. And the levee, as you've probably guessed, was built with federal money. If it weren't for this "pork-barrel" project, a good bit of Tell City would long since have been swept away. Pork, I told my audience, is in the eye of the beholder.

I do not mean to suggest that you can't find some mighty debatable appropriations in each year's federal budget. In the 2001 budget, for instance, there's \$1.5 million aimed at refurbishing a statue in one powerful senator's state; \$650,000 for ornamental fish research; and millions for various memorials, institutes and studies that, in the scheme of things, will benefit relatively few Americans. Congress never fails to provide plenty of material for groups that make it their business to uncover questionable spending.

But think for a moment about what we characterize as "pork-barrel spending." Much of it is for infrastructure: highways, canals, reservoirs, dams and the like. There's money for erosion-control projects, federal buildings and military installations. There's support for museums and arts centers. There's backing for academic institutions, health-care facilities and job-training institutes. All of these have some value, and indeed may prove important to lots of people. Especially when it comes to infrastructure spending, "pork-barrel projects" are rarely worthless.

At the same time, my scolder in Tell City was on to something. In and of itself, "pork" may provide valuable support to worthy projects. But it also helps shore up projects that most of the country would rightly question. The problem is, Congress doesn't do a good job of distinguishing between the two.

To begin with, pork-barrel projects are often inserted by powerful members in spending bills surreptitiously, literally in the dark of night. It may happen within a day of the final vote on a spending measure, and most legislators don't even notice. Nothing is more frustrating for members than to vote for major national legislation only to discover later that it also contained obscure pork-barrel items like a Lawrence Welk memorial. Or when legislators do notice a particular project and have concerns about it, they are often reluctant to object, because they may have legislation or projects of their own that they don't want to put at risk. The current process frequently doesn't allow Congress to weigh the relative merit of spending projects, to look at the interests of the country as a whole, or to weigh the needs of one region against another before deciding how to spend the public's money. The problem is not so much that the spending is

wasted (it usually does some good), but whether it could better be spent for other projects. Congress usually ignores this question and simply provides the money at the influential member's request.

So is there a solution? A few years ago when I was still in Congress, a reform committee I headed up recommended requiring that all funding earmarked for individual projects be listed clearly in publicly available reports before the overall funding bill could be voted on by Congress. That would force proponents to justify publicly their provisions for special projects, and would help ensure that fewer wasteful projects will pass. Sunshine is still the best disinfectant for wasteful proposals. And on that I think my critic from Tell City and I could both agree.

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