GUEST OBSERVER

By Roy T. Meyers

How to Pass Spending Bills on Time This Year

President Barack Obama recently signed, in private, the bill providing regular appropriations for domestic programs, more than five months after the fiscal year began. His apparent embarrassment was because the bill included more than 8,500 earmarks, the objects of extended attacks in the Senate. The president also proposed additional reforms for earmarks, as did the Democratic leadership in Congress.

As expected, the "porkbusters" are dissatisfied with these reforms. A ceiling for earmarks of "only" 1 percent of discretionary appropriations is still "real money," as former Sen. Everett Dirksen (R-Ill.) used to say. Requiring competitive bidding only for earmarks to for-profit firms leaves a loophole for laundering funds through nonprofits or state and local governments.

Senators who want earmarks for their constituents would now be more likely to enact cloture and pass bills on time.

In general, though, the proposed reforms respond to the porkbusters' demand for greater transparency. Legislators will be required to identify the earmarks they request, and agencies can review and comment on earmarks before enactment. These provisions should make earmarks more comparable to projects that undergo merit reviews and programs that must demonstrate results in the executive budgetary process.

What many reformers don't understand, though, is that greater transparency often encourages earmarking. The new process certifies that legislators have brought home the bacon, something their constituents typically appreciate, because many earmarks devote funds to apparently desirable activities. This is why amendments to strip earmarks from bills almost always fail. But perhaps this doesn't greatly dismay the porkbusters, who lose valiantly and then claim government is so corrupt that they should be put in charge. In response, the appropriators maintain that they are the ones protecting the fundamentals of representative government, when they respond to requests from their constituents.

So, despite the new reforms, the government is still likely to spend an inordinate amount of time arguing about earmarks. But there's a potential solution to this problem, which is to create a strong incentive to pass appropriations bills on time. Here's how the president and Congress could agree to make it work:

1. When Congress writes the budget resolution, it agrees with the president on a dollar total for earmarks for next year's budget that is lower than the 1 percent target.

2. The president pledges not to veto the 12 regular appropriations bills because they contain earmarks, as long as Congress presents him with the bills by the beginning of the fiscal year (or, preferably, a few days earlier) and does not exceed the agreed-upon total of earmarks.

3. But, if Congress fails to present the appropriations measures on a timely basis, it will eliminate all earmarks from the bills.

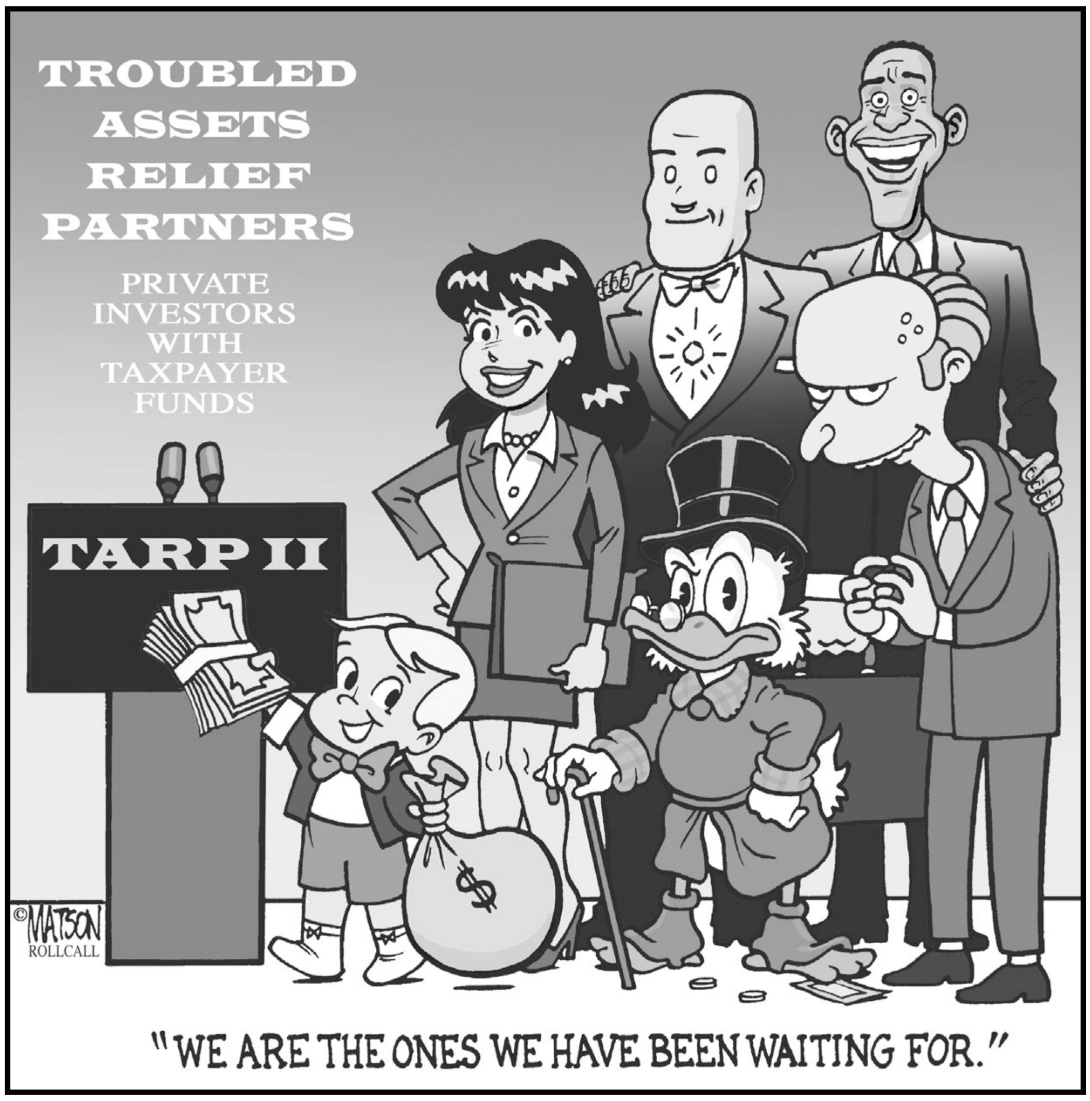
The obvious objection to this deal is that it would encourage porkbusting Senators to engage in dilatory actions to prevent bills from passing by the end of September. So what's new about that? Actually, what would be new is that their fellow Senators who want earmarks for their constituents would now be more likely to enact cloture and pass bills on time, rather than hypocritically oppose bills that include earmarks they requested.

When the political incentives instead favor delay, as is the case now, agencies cannot execute their budgets efficiently — they don't know how much they have to spend until months into the fiscal year. Eliminating that waste would exceed any savings from killing earmarks.

The greatest savings from this new process, though, would be the end of the "earmark distraction" — focusing on appropriations for just a few projects rather than on the fundamental question of what the government should be spending relative to its financial resources and the needs of the nation.

Our nation is facing an extreme economic crisis. Exploding government debt will soon require the president and Congress to identify major cuts in spending and to eliminate tax preferences. The first step toward making these tough but unavoidable choices would be to agree that symbolic battles on earmarks must end.

Roy T. Meyers is a professor of political science at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.



"WE ARE THE ONES WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR."

LETTERS

Double Standard For Quigley

Your March 19 At the Races item on Illinois Congressional hopeful Mike Quigley's (D) fundraising was a comical example of Roll Call trying to manufacture a story where there wasn't one. You snidely report that though Quigley has only won his primary, he is "wasting no time fundraising like he's already a Member." Is this news? That Congressional candidates raise money before being elected? Imagine!

I understand your point, that Quigley is the Democratic nominee in a strongly Democratic district and is all but certain to come to Congress. But please recognize the double standard. Practically every Member of Congress coasts to re-election after winning his or her primary. Unless you plan on mentioning it every time a candidate (incumbent or not) raises money despite being in uncontested or lightly contested races, you owe Mr. Quigley an apology.

David Hall
Washington, D.C.

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