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Crowding the trough

By Christopher T. Cross

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WASHINGTON - With the success of *The West Wing*, it seems as though television has discovered national politics as a topic.

Perhaps these programs are not as entertaining as some of the reality shows, but they often have interesting plots. Unfortunately, even the most vivid imagination of the best writers is no match for the reality of what actually happens in Congress.

For example, an episode of the short-lived series *Mr. Sterling*, about a fictional senator from California who takes on the establishment, was based on a fight among several senators over \$16 million to fund pet education programs - that being the only money available for senatorial pork-barrel projects.

The reality is that the education chapter alone of the omnibus appropriation bill that was signed into law earlier this year contains 787 pet pork projects costing more than \$364 million. Clearly, fact in this case is scarier than fiction, and the reality of massive deficits at both the federal and state levels seems immaterial when it comes to creating more pork.

Until the mid-1990s, the federal education money bills rarely contained any such skullduggery. Today, it seems routine. But at what cost?

Reading the list, replete with projects such as an adaptive ski school in Alaska, an outreach astronomy program in New Mexico and an opera company in Philadelphia, I was reminded that a few months ago Congress passed legislation incorporating the principles of scientifically based research in the funding of education programs.

Hardly pausing for a breath, Congress then thumbed its collective nose at that high-flown rhetoric and created the largest education slop trough of all time, thereby ensuring that not one of these 787 projects would be required to show evidence of effectiveness - a classic case of "not in my back yard" (read, "congressional district").

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One of the principles that has made this nation great is that of merit: Any person, any idea can succeed if it has merit, as opposed to all too many countries where merit is far less important than class or political sponsorship.

With budgets at all levels being squeezed tight, the insult to our system of this political outrage is all the greater.

The \$364 million that is going to fund these pork projects could instead increase by 60 percent the money in after-school programs or more than triple the amount that we spend on federal research programs in education, those that actually require the application of the principles of scientifically based research. What a novel idea.

When reading the list of 787 projects, one can't help but say of some, "Not a bad idea, it may have some merit." But it's beside the point. Yes, you can argue that that the University of Kentucky needs \$1 million to help special education teachers integrate technology into their curriculum. But the point is: Would the \$1 million be better spent for another purpose?

What about the My Hero Project in Branford, Conn., with a grant of \$50,000 to expand an interactive Web site? What if that money was spent instead for an after-school program that would keep children off the streets in Miami? Who other than a member of the House or Senate has said that the project in Pasadena, Calif., for a math, science, technology magnet program (\$100,000) for Washington Middle School is a better investment than a competing program in Dallas, Chicago or Cleveland?

In some of the accounts where money has been attached to fund the pork, the amount of money that has been congressionally mandated to pay for pet projects is greater than the amount available for competitive grants, making a mockery of the process that created these "competitive" programs. What does that do for the morale, as well as the existence, of quality programs across the nation that did not have an angel in Congress?

In fact, other than the education money bill being a convenient place to hide this rancid pork, one can ask why a veterinary technician distance education program is in this legislation. What happened to the role of the Agriculture Department? Why does Los Angeles Valley College get \$250,000 for a career ladder nursing program when the Department of Health and Human Services deals with health staffing issues? The pork process wreaks havoc in many places. The stench will last for a long time.

Unfortunately, this year is not an isolated event. While there were but a few projects in 1996, by 2001 the list had grown to more than \$250 million. Ten years ago, the number was fewer than 10. This year's \$364 million sets a new high-water mark. Education is supposed to be a national priority, not a grab bag for special favors.

We must jettison the pork from the appropriations process. Programs of merit, not political muscle, should be the key factor in allocating public funds, money that

represents the taxes of all of us. Only this would ensure that merit has been restored and that no effective program is left behind.

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