

Getting Schooled On Earmarks

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Of all the companies that claim to sell terrific products, of all the groups that claim to do good works, how do certain ones get access to members of Congress? How do they convince those members of Congress to give them special tax dollars in the form of "earmarks"? The answer often lies in lobbyists and political connections. And, as it turns out, the company or group seeking favor often ends up making campaign contributions to the members of Congress who "help" them by giving them your tax dollars.

Critics say it's nothing more than members of Congress using your tax dollars to attract and reward campaign donors. If a direct quid pro quo can be proven, it can be a violation of federal law. But often, that direct connection is difficult to make. It's just the circumstances that are so suggestive and can look so ... bad.

Some think that's the case with Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., and the founder of a company that sells a reading program called "Voyager," Randy Best. There are hundreds of reading programs out there, but Sen. Landrieu favored Best's program, giving it a \$2 million earmark of tax dollars to put it in Washington, D.C. public schools (which had not asked for the program in its budget). Best had gotten access to Landrieu while lobbying for Voyager on Capitol Hill. Landrieu doesn't claim to have done any comparative research to see how Randy Best's product stood up against others. She simply said she met him, he impressed her and his program impressed her. She made sure they got the money.

Wouldn't many people or companies like the chance to present their idea one-on-one to a member of Congress, without having it measured against the competition, and walk away with millions of tax dollars just because they impressed that one member?

Back to the case of Landrieu and the Voyager earmark. As the earmark was working its way through the Congressional process, Randy Best arranged a lucrative fundraiser for Landrieu. And his employees, friends and family suddenly became new donors to the Landrieu re-election campaign. They quickly raised more than \$30,000 for the Landrieu campaign chest. In the campaign world where individual donations are subject to federal limits, that's a huge chunk of change. And to many people, it looks like there was a deal: Landrieu gave Best the money he wanted, and he gave her lots of campaign donations in return. However, both Landrieu and Best strongly insist the earmark and campaign donations are not connected whatsoever.

That was in 2001. Landrieu and Best have continued their mutually beneficial relationship. And it's now hounding Landrieu on the campaign trail as she faces re-election this year. Sen. Landrieu wouldn't agree to an interview with the Washington Post's investigative reporter James Grimaldi when he delved into the story.

When we picked up on the issue, Landrieu agreed to talk to us to try to clear things up. She spent much of the time talking about her commitment to public education, and her strong desire to help children read better.

Basically there are two views:

1. Landrieu used the lure of your tax dollars to get herself campaign donations.
2. Landrieu helped Best and his Voyager program because she thought it was a terrific way to help kids read. She would've earmarked to Voyager even if Best hadn't given her a dime.

Even under the second scenario, there's a question of the fairness of the earmarking process. There are many reading programs out there ... but one company's executive and his lobbyists found the ear of Landrieu back in 2001. And only that company got the earmark money. It seems to come down to this: If you can get direct access to a member of Congress with control over the taxpayer purse through earmarks – if you are important enough or know the right people or have powerful lobbyists or have enough money – you can arrange a personal meeting with a member of Congress, and you might just get an earmark of tax dollars for your project or company ... just for the asking! Even if your company isn't the best or the most cost-efficient. Even if your company has been turned down in the regular competitive budget process that chooses projects based on the need for them and their ability to perform well. Even if your company doesn't have much of a track record.

That's how earmarks work. It just takes one member of Congress and the willingness of the others not to rock the boat. Since most members of Congress likewise earmark, they tend to leave each other's earmarks alone.

With earmarks, to get a slice of the taxpayer pie, sometimes all you need is to get your foot in the door. But that kind of access usually takes lobbyists and money – and that's something most Americans can't afford.