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How Minority Leader Pelosi Can Use the Lame Duck Session to Restore Integrity to the Federal Budget Process

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Although Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and her Democratic colleagues will not formally assume control of the House of Representatives until the 110th Congress convenes in January, the must-pass legislation scheduled for mid-November's lame duck session offers the minority leader a target-rich battlefield in which to establish a tone and standard to define her leadership. Of the hundreds of bills that many Members and interest groups hope will be enacted by year's end, only a few will pass, and those few will include the nine appropriations bills yet to be passed by both chambers. It is on these bills that minority leader Pelosi can make her mark by demonstrating that henceforth the budget of the United States government will be made in the United States Capitol, not in the offices of the several thousand lobbyists who have hijacked the process by selling earmarks to paying clients.

In the few weeks remaining of the 109th Congress, Representative Pelosi can restore the federal budget process to where the Constitution has placed it by leading a bipartisan majority to withhold support for any appropriations bills that include earmarks. This stand would force the burden of responsibility onto those members prepared to shut down the government on behalf of their allied special interests. The fiscally irresponsible would not win this showdown, and the unencumbered budget that would emerge would become a benchmark of financial integrity by which the next Congress could be measured.

A common characteristic of the appropriations bills yet to be enacted (nine in the House, ten in the

Senate) is the inclusion of thousands of earmarks (as many as 12,000 so far) that would channel billions of taxpayers' dollars to costly projects that benefit privileged constituencies. While many in Congress contend that these earmarks provide essential services to their districts, a substantial portion of each year's earmarks has been bought and sold through hefty fees paid to lobbyists and campaign contributions to Members. And as several recent investigations and indictments reveal, corruption finances a part of the congressional earmark trade.

By canceling these 12,000 or so earmarks now before Congress, Ms. Pelosi would strike a blow against the shadow government of lobbyists who have increased their share of the federal budget process in recent years. By breaking this pay-to-play link, she will restore to Congress an important constitutional prerogative that some Members have rented out to others. No longer able to offer clients earmark guarantees as they have these last few years, lobbyists will find fewer clients willing to pay steep fees for uncertain results. As the lobbyists' resources shrink, ordinary citizens' power will be restored and will fill the vacuum.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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To be sure, keeping citizens' interests at the forefront of Congress will require more than a single dramatic gesture during a week or two of a lame duck session. To make these standards of integrity permanent, Minority Leader Pelosi must also use the November session to impose much tougher ethics rules on how Congress interacts with privileged constituencies.

Rejecting earmarks would be a bold course for the Minority Leader, and there is no assurance that members of her own party would comply. But Representative Pelosi is no stranger to bold and contro-

versial moves on wasteful earmarks: In late September a year ago, less than three weeks after Katrina devastated New Orleans and coastal Mississippi, Pelosi was the first of just a handful of Members to offer the earmarks she had won her district for Katrina relief. Although few followed her offer of sacrifice, that effort set in motion a national debate on earmarks and corruption that Ms. Pelosi can now bring to closure.

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