



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

## A Fishing Expedition with Senator Stevens

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President and C.E.O.

ing upgrades to his vacation home and favorable auto deals from oilman Bill Allen for favors he did for Allen's now-defunct company, Veco. Now that Stevens has been collared, I can tell my story about him. Many people who have served in the U.S. executive branch have a Ted Stevens story.

Within the U.S. government, Stevens is legendary for inserting earmarks into virtually every piece of legislation to come before the Senate Appropriations Committee, guiding a portion of the funds to projects in Alaska. The "bridge to nowhere," a pork barrel project for contractors in Alaska, has become the iconic representation of his craft. Stevens supports his constituents in Alaska by handing them chunks of the federal budget, and they support him . . . sometimes too well and under the table, apparently.

In 1993 I arrived at the Pentagon with a new job and an urgent mission – use \$400 million in U.S. defense dollars annually to cause the former Soviet countries to dismantle their nuclear, chemical and biological weapons before they decided to become nuclear weapons states or the weapons made their way to rogue states or terrorists. As I reviewed my first year's budget with my staff, I noticed a strange item, listed at \$10 million, called "Arctic Nuclear Waste Assessment."

I asked my staff what this was. They explained that it was funding a research project on the migration of nuclear waste from abandoned Soviet submarines in Arctic waters. It was conducted partly in Alaska and included employing Alaskan scientists measuring the presence of radioactivity in seal blubber along the Alaskan coast. *What?!?!?* I said. What does that have to do with dismantling weapons of mass destruction in the former Soviet Union? We were supposed to be securing highly enriched uranium and plutonium, cutting up missiles, closing down nuclear bases, removing nuclear warheads. All that seal blubber measurements had in common with nuclear weapons aimed at the U.S. was radioactivity; a commonality without a connection. A naïve newcomer to the ways of the federal government, I proclaimed

this a diversion of taxpayer money and declared that we would see that this item was removed from our budget.

The Pentagon staffers who had been assigned to me, veterans of many government budget battles, turned pale and began to quake. They pointed out that this was Senator Stevens' project, which he had inserted into the Nunn-Lugar budget when it came before the Senate Appropriations Committee, and it was the quid pro quo for Stevens passing through the other \$390 million in the budget. We didn't dare object to Stevens' project, they said, or we would risk losing the rest of the budget. They urged me to not even hint that there was a problem with his earmark. The senator's staffers were fiercely protective of his earmarks and were likely to punish us if we raised any question.

I made another half-hearted attempt or two at eliminating this diversion of funds, which appeared regularly in each year's Nunn-Lugar budget, before giving up. Thirty million dollars eventually flowed into this study, although it never found any evidence of radioactive pollution in Arctic waters.

The Arctic research project probably wasn't the worst of Stevens' earmarks, since to our knowledge none of it was

paid to members of his family or came back to him as illegal contributions. But each year, the Nunn-Lugar program made its \$10 million tithe to Senator Stevens, and that was \$10 million less going into dismantling weapons aimed at the U.S.

Over the past four years, Senator Stevens has made 891 earmarks, channeling \$3.2 billion to projects in Alaska, or almost \$5,000 for each Alaska resident. Multiply this by hundreds of members of Congress and a similar interaction where executive agencies are afraid to challenge the earmarks for fear of what will happen to their larger programs, and you have the magnitude of this national problem.

The word on the street is that Senator Stevens will survive his indictment and trial to be re-elected by the citizens of Alaska. Given his largesse to his constituents, one can understand why. In truth, he is simply another victim of the way our political system is structured.

We can talk ourselves blue in the face about the need to change direction in this country, to shore up our infrastructure, protect our environment, reduce taxes, improve health care, make government more effective, and so on. But we are unlikely to see real change until we eliminate the way private campaign contributions skew our national priorities toward the needs of those individuals and groups who pay to elect our office holders. Ω

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