

August 29, 2005      When Congress returns to Washington in September, final touches in the form of last-minute pork will be added to the enormous 2006 federal budget. Rosy predictions about a balanced budget in five years will be made, and both parties will pat themselves on the back for crafting another budget agreement. There will be little partisan acrimony, and the media scarcely will report the results of the vote. Congressional spending, which dramatically affects every American, never generates much public interest-- while distractions like Terri Schiavo and Michael Jackson occupy the nation's attention for months. Congressional budget agreements really don't mean much. A congressional budget passed in 2005 has absolutely no impact on spending decisions in the future, and will be quickly forgotten as all past budgets have been. No politician or government official in 2010 will be heard to say, "Gee, we promised back in 2005 to spend less than this, so we better stick to that pledge." Only a fool can believe that Congress will consider itself bound by past budgets, and constitutionally the budget is passed one year at a time. Anything else is just talk. Congress can make all the deals it wants, but it can only implement a budget for the coming fiscal year. What is being called a "balanced budget" by 2010 is merely a hopeful projection of spending, matched with projected, hypothetical economic forecasts. To say the federal government can correctly predict exactly how the economy-- which is the sum total of the spending and savings habits of everyone in the nation-- will behave five years from now is ludicrous. For more than 25 years there have been promises about balancing the budget five years out using government forecasts. It's always the same story: "Just give us a little more time, and we promise we'll stop spending so much. We just have to fix X, Y, and Z first." Congress is like the drunk who promises to sober up tomorrow, without the slightest intention of doing so. The voting public is like the battered wife who somehow keeps believing the promises. We will never have a balanced budget until Congress either raises taxes or cuts spending. It's really that simple. I support balancing the budget by cutting the budget, but most people in Washington abhor that option. They abhor making real cuts to the budget because it means cutting the sacred cows of modern American politics. If we cut spending, we cut the power of Congress. Most people do not realize it, but absolutely no major program has been cut one cent in many, many years. What programs can we cut? What agencies and departments should go? A better question is: What should stay on a permanent basis? That's easy: only those functions specifically outlined in the Constitution. Is foreign aid allowed by the Constitution? No. Is public housing in the Constitution? No. Is federal involvement in education? No. Are the EPA, OSHA, and the BATF? No. Is protecting our borders? Yes. The bottom line is that everyone in Washington says they oppose pork and want government to spend less, but few in Congress actually vote that way. Most DC politicians are far too dependent on special interest money to make any waves. "Go along to get along" is the creed of the political class, and nothing will change unless and until the American public stops electing and re-electing the big spenders to office.