Two Defeats For Earmarks
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By Robert Novak

Though obscured by the complexities of legislation, reformers trying to rein in congressional spending excesses scored signal victories in the House and Senate in the same hour late Thursday afternoon.

In the process, chairmen of the House and Senate Appropriations committees suffered humiliating defeats. In the House, Chairman Jerry Lewis bowed to Republican leaders to reform runaway earmark spending. In the Senate, Chairman Thad Cochran lost an effort to stop Sen. Tom Coburn's crusade against earmarks.

Terrified by possible loss of their majorities in November, Republicans in Congress may have turned a corner in casting off the tyranny of the appropriators over the spending process. House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert exerted his will, and newly installed Majority Leader John Boehner registered his first triumph. In scoring his first floor victory over an earmark, Coburn showed he is more than a nuisance freshman senator and, allied with Sen. John McCain, a force to be reckoned with.

The House recessed in disarray three weeks ago when Lewis forced the leadership to cancel consideration of the budget resolution because he opposed restrictions on earmarking by the appropriators.

When Lewis and the appropriators returned to Washington last week, they encountered an unfriendly climate. Hastert and Boehner did not blink. A clever career legislator, Lewis last Tuesday said he would accept earmark reforms if applied to all legislation, not just appropriations, when the lobbyist reform bill reached the floor Thursday. There was no way to make those changes in 48 hours.

Lewis' aim was to get the leadership to take the legislation off the floor rather than lose the vote on the rule permitting debate. But Hastert was not yielding this time, as he informed an emergency closed-door conference of all House Republicans at noon Thursday. Rep. Mike Pence, head of the conservative Republican Study Committee, told hushed colleagues that they must make a "bold statement" on reform or face disaster in November.

The bill looked dead that afternoon when the appropriators asked to confer with the leadership. Near the end of the meeting, the committee's most junior member -- Rep. Rodney Alexander of Louisiana -- told how he had crossed the aisle to become a Republican in 2004. He said he would remain a Republican even if the party lost its majority this year, but declared the earmark reforms are essential.

Facing opposition on his own committee, Lewis capitulated. Only one appropriator voted against the rule as it passed, 216-207. Lewis and the appropriators tried to plant the story
that this was a compromise, but it was not. The requirements that authors of earmarks be publicly identified and that any member of Congress be permitted to propose an earmark's removal are nonnegotiable.

In the Senate, McCain's crusade against earmarks has a new fighter in Coburn (who McCain says has supplantled him as the Senate's Miss Congeniality). On Wednesday, Coburn offered an amendment to eliminate 19 earmarks from the emergency appropriations bill and came just shy of defeating a $700 million railroad relocation in Mississippi.

On Thursday, Coburn proposed to eliminate $15 million for "seafood promotion strategy." McCain told the Senate: "Let me save the American taxpayers $125 million right now by telling all Americans now to eat seafood. Eat seafood. It is good for you." When Coburn rejected Cochran's call for a voice vote, the normally calm Appropriations chairman in a fury made a non-debatable tabling motion to kill Coburn's proposal. The astounding outcome was a 51-44 bipartisan victory for Coburn and McCain, following years of failure in such initiatives.

After the vote, Coburn could be seen animatedly lecturing a silent Cochran. It can be guessed he was promising to hold the Senate's feet to the fire on one earmark after another. Coburn this week will propose removing from the bill $500 million to be paid Northrop Grumman for lost income caused by Hurricane Katrina. The outcome will indicate whether Thursday's events on Capitol Hill truly point to new congressional concern about using taxpayer money.