

August 13, 2007 Last week this column addressed the train wreck that federal spending has become. To score political points politicians will make loud noise about fairly small matters such as earmarks, even while refusing to address the real problem. Namely, that our federal government is too big and does too much. Politicians prefer to pass a bill or create a program every time somebody points to a new social problem, this way they can tell their constituents how much they are doing to help. Instead of rationally explaining the proper role of government, politicians have attempted to play the role of friend, preacher, parent, social worker, etcetera-- in essence, whatever any organized special interest can demand. Waste, fraud and abuse are often easy targets. Everybody knows a story of the government doing something absolutely ridiculous and wasteful. Plus, recent headlines have been packed with stories of corruption in Washington. One thing that has not drawn enough attention is the link between the size of government and the mismanagement that leads to wasted money. If the government was restrained within its proper constitutional functions, it would be far better managed and much more readily would proper oversight occur. You see, while waste, fraud and abuse are very easy to attack, it seems they are much more difficult to actually address within the current federal behemoth. For example, the General Accounting Office puts out a "high risk list" and describes this list as programs with "vulnerabilities to fraud, waste and abuse and mismanagement." There are currently 27 programs and operations on this list, up from 26 last year. But here are the more surprising facts, the list was originated with 14 programs in 1990. Of those original 14 programs, from 17 years ago, only 8 have been removed. How can it be that 6 programs remain on such a list nearly two decades later? While government is supposed to move slowly, this is ridiculous. What GAO is saying is that a problem exists, we have been aware of it for 17 years, and it is still not corrected. Of course, with the size and scope of federal activity, including attempting to rebuild societies in the middle east, and massively expanding federal involvement in education (along with thousands of other "programs"), it is small wonder that this list doesn't really get addressed. Yet it does seem reasonable to ask "If you can't stop waste in 6 federal programs after 17 years, how exactly will you improve local schools or foreign nations?" In the time that the GAO list has existed, there have been 33 additions and a mere 18 removals, including two this year. Only when the people demand the federal government stop trying to meet any and all demands, and instead return to a constitutionally limited republic, will the list of programs subject to waste, fraud and abuse be dramatically reduced. While government will never be perfect, a limited government is far more able to not only identify problems, but to actually correct them.