June 18, 2007 Last week's big battle on the House floor over earmarks in the annual appropriations bills was won by Republicans, who succeeded in getting the Democratic leadership to agree to clearly identify each earmark in the future. While this is certainly a victory for more transparency and openness in the spending process, and as such should be applauded, I am concerned that this may not necessarily be a victory for those of us who want a smaller federal government. Though much attention is focused on the notorious abuses of earmarking, and there are plenty of examples, in fact even if all earmarks were eliminated we would not necessary save a single penny in the federal budget. Because earmarks are funded from spending levels that have been determined before a single earmark is agreed to, with or without earmarks the spending levels remain the same. Eliminating earmarks designated by Members of Congress would simply transfer the funding decision process to federal bureaucrats rather then elected representatives. In an already flawed system, earmarks can at least allow residents of Congressional districts to have a greater role in allocating federal funds - their tax dollars - than if the money is allocated behind locked doors by bureaucrats. So we can be critical of the abuses in the current system but we shouldn't lose sight of how some reforms may not actually make the system much better. The real problem, and one that was unfortunately not addressed in last week's earmark dispute, is the size of the federal government and the amount of money we are spending in these appropriations bills. Even cutting a few thousand or even a million dollars from a multi-hundred billion dollar appropriation bill will not really shrink the size of government. So there is a danger that small-government conservatives will look at this small victory for transparency and forget the much larger and more difficult battle of returning the United States government to spending levels more in line with its constitutional functions. Without taking a serious look at the actual total spending in these appropriations bills, we will miss the real threat to our economic security. Failed government agencies like FEMA will still get tens of billions of dollars to mismanage when the next disaster strikes. Corrupt foreign governments will still be lavishly funded with dollars taken from working Americans to prop up their regimes. The United Nations will still receive its generous annual tribute taken from the American taxpayer. Americans will still be forced to pay for elaborate military bases to protect borders overseas while our own borders remain porous and unguarded. These are the real issues we must address when we look at reforming our yearly spending extravaganza called the appropriations season. So we need to focus on the longer term and more difficult task of reducing the total size of the federal budget and the federal government and to return government to its constitutional functions. We should not confuse this welcome victory for transparency in the earmarking process with a victory in our long-term goal of this reduction in government taxing and spending.