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This little piggy went to market

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If you ever see someone at a press conference dressed in a pig outfit, you can give partial credit (or blame) to Ronald Reagan.

In 1982, President Reagan issued an executive order that created what is popularly known as the Grace Commission, a group that examined the federal budget. Eventually, the commission made over 2,400 recommendations that, if enacted, would shave \$141 billion a year from the federal budget.

Two years later, that commission morphed into Citizens Against Government Waste (www.cagw.org), a private organization based in Washington, D.C. The group claims that over time its predecessor has saved federal taxpayers \$944 billion.

CAGW's most famous product is the Congressional Pig Book, which lists questionable federal spending. The title alludes to the term "pork-barrel spending," which predates "earmark," a more recent word in the political lexicon. Long before the "bridge to nowhere" caught national attention, the Congressional Pig Book highlighted cases of questionable spending.

Over the years, the pig books have brought amusement and outrage, and in recent years have served as blog fodder: \$246,000 for a farmer's market in Ohio (1997); \$750,000 to study Alaskan grasshoppers (1999); \$500,000 to the Missouri Soybean Association (2006).

To qualify for inclusion in the book, a federal project must meet at least one of seven criteria: requested by only one chamber of Congress; not specifically authorized; not competitively awarded; not requested by the president; greatly exceeding the president's budget request or the previous year's funding level; not the subject of congressional hearings; or serving only a local or special interest.

The practice of ridiculing budgets has been extended to the state level as well. In cooperation with state-focused groups, CAGW has produced "Piglet" reports for 12 states.

Glancing through some of the reports reveals how far from standard government responsibilities public officials can stray. They take a more expansive view of "waste"

than the federal reports. Still, the following examples show that the piglet series can focus debate on the value of items in state budgets.

Are public officials abusing the public trust by enjoying unusually expensive perks? Ohio Lt. Gov. Bruce Johnson once took a ride in an F-16 owned by the Ohio National Guard. The state's second highest-elected official was not on a training mission; he was merely along for the ride of a lifetime. The state spends \$5,000 an hour to keep the planes flying—an expensive thrill for Johnson.

Should a government favor a private entity that can easily take care of its own needs? In Maine, the state recently spent \$99,000 for a “paint and wallpaper analysis” of a house owned by Bowdoin College. The private college has an endowment of \$452 million.

What happens when one unit of government doesn't do the job the first time around? Another unit gets money to address the problem. In Oklahoma, 39 percent of the first-year students at state colleges had to take remedial classes, diverting college money into K-12 purposes.

Remember the \$700 toilet seats? Officials in Tennessee spent \$5,075 for 188 coat hooks, installation included, for legislative meeting rooms. That's over \$26 per hook.

Is it worth the trouble to create an industry from scratch? Kentucky gave nearly \$3 million to a private company to start a shrimp farm. Kentuckians can't buy “native” shrimp in the supermarket. But this hardly calls for a tax-favored business.

Does the spending go to something that, well, just isn't that important? In 2005, Minnesota spent \$1 million for a replica Viking ship. It wasn't even placed near Lake Superior, which at the least is home to ocean-going vessels. Instead, it went to Moorhead.

Does the spending favor those who do not need taxpayer support? The most obvious instance involves building stadiums for professional sports teams. Sure, they provide entertainment, but so do bowling alleys, which are (rightly) not subsidized. Taxing the ordinary person to pay for the financial and professional benefit of multimillionaire athletes and mega-millionaire team owners is a perversion of the public trust.

Taking the public's money is a serious thing. Most people work hard for their pay, which legislators siphon off in the name of the common good. When those funds end up going to private gain, the noble purposes of government are trivialized. While there are obvious limits to piglet books, they remind us that effective government worthy of respect comes only through transparency and debate.