

Self serving greed

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By [ART PARKER](#) , Editor

It got past me. Until recently I did not know about a major taxpayer rip off that has been going on for decades. It came to light once again as part of the recent budget deal. In the Senate's bill, which included raising the debt ceiling, there was a payment of \$174,000 to one Bonnie Englebardt Lautenberg, widow of late Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ).

Lautenberg died June 3 of this year. The payment is made because the Senator died. That's right. Let's look at the Senate handbook for an explanation of what the "legal" procedure is following the death of a member in office... "in the next appropriations bill, an item will be inserted for a gratuity to be paid to the widow(er) or other next-of-kin, in the amount of one-year's compensation."

Hmmm. Isn't that nice. You die in office and our federal government takes our money and gives it to one of his/her survivors. Perhaps I shouldn't be so mean and vicious about all of this. I'm sure Mrs. Lautenberg needed the money, after all, the published estimated net worth of Senator Lautenberg on the day he died was \$56.8 million.

Oh yeah, she really needs the money.

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Here is the other part of the deal. It's tax free. By statute, the money is designated as a gift from the government, and a gift is not taxable income to a donee. She really needed to avoid the taxes on the money as well, I'm sure.

This is what was said by the Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington: "Congress already helps cover some of the cost of funeral expenses and monuments for members who die in office, as well as traditional retirement benefits. The death gratuity is on top of these payments."

After a little research I found that the Congressional death gratuity was initially intended as a form of life insurance and therefore, it is paid regardless of the financial status of the deceased Congressional member.

Further research does reveal there have been a couple of members of Congress in the past that have paid lip service to eliminating the death gratuities. The last time (as far as I can determine) that anyone tried to do something about this was in 2012 when the Republicans took over the House of Representatives. The Congressional death gratuities were among the much ballyhooed budget cuts the Republicans were going to make (the Republicans said their cuts would be \$2.5 trillion over ten years, which has not happened). A Republican representative from Florida introduced HR 3127 and once it was assigned to the House Committee on House Administration it died quickly and I am sure intentionally.

I have thought about this payment to Lautenberg's widow for several days and no matter how hard I try to justify it I can't. We have people in the military that protect us, and as bullets are being fired upon them many of their families are back here in America living on food stamps. I think of our local needs and how many families could be helped with that money. I see many of our roads in need of repair and I see our schools always short of money. But a Senator worth \$56.8 million dies and Congress takes money confiscated from us in the form of taxes and gives it away, tax free, to his family.

It also bothers me that Congress can do no better with the financial management of these death gratuities. Why not insure all the members of Congress for pennies on the dollar and it will cost the taxpayers much less when they die? If Senators Sessions and Shelby, and the air head representative Martha Roby, were standing before me I would be compelled to ask them if they are so stupid as to not consider insuring members of Congress instead of using the more expensive practice of just giving our money away to those that don't need it.

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I'm sure that any response they give me will confirm my worst suspicions about the limits of their intellectual capacity.

Of course, none of this speaks well for us either. We are the ones that put them in office and we have kept them there.