

In-your-face moves are all in the game

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Inside the Miscellaneous Trade and Technical Corrections Act of 2006 are \$300 million in tariff relief for items found up and down the aisles in Wal-Mart: nail clippers, artificial flowers, clocks, athletic footwear, music boxes, baby carriers and china.

The items make it in the bill because they are rare, scarce or not made in the United States, and they're placed there by a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, of which U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal, D-Springfield, is a member.

He helped the Springfield-based Spalding Corp. in getting nearly \$700,000 in tariff relief on basketballs and volleyballs. That's right. There are no basketballs or volleyballs made in the United States. Spalding has most of its balls manufactured in China and then imported here.

The irony isn't lost on Neal.

First of all, Neal grew up in Springfield, the birthplace of basketball. He loves the game. Grew up on it. Still plays it. It is a game won with muscle, strategy, technique, luck and teammates. It can also be a very in-your-face game, a quality that sometimes serves Neal well.

Second, he voted against NAFTA - the North American Free Trade Agreement - because to him it meant manufacturing jobs leaving Massachusetts not just for the South, like in the old days, but to Mexico, where labor is much cheaper.

Spalding has no manufacturing jobs in Springfield. Tens of thousands of jobs have left Western Massachusetts.

Third, he is the Democrats' go-to guy on the Ways and Means Committee to push legislation that would sew up loopholes in tax laws that allow U.S. companies to set up paper corporations in Bermuda to slash how much they owe Uncle Sam in taxes. It irritates Neal that U.S. companies reap the benefits of America's infrastructure and security systems, but weasel out of their full share of taxes, in the middle of a war no less.

With Spalding, Neal has no conflict. None.

Spalding is a constituent with 55 professional jobs. Hourly wage jobs have up and gone in droves, leaving Springfield, Holyoke, Chicopee and Westfield with their still assembly lines in red brick factories, now closed and silent.

Carlos Gonzalez, the president of the Massachusetts Latino Chamber of Commerce, recently visited Neal at his Capitol Hill office. Gonzalez told the congressman about a plan to have a Thornes-style retail market in Springfield's downtown. He described a setting in which Latino business owners could set up shop in incubator spaces with hopes

that their restaurants, stores, salons or studios could grow.

Neal likes Gonzalez and his idea. They arranged another meeting in Springfield. It is what members of Congress do. Even in the age of BlackBerrys, it seems that each of the 435 House members operates on the basis of an index card they carry in their breast pockets. The card, created by a staffer, breaks the member's day incrementally in quarter hours, 30 minutes for party briefings, an hour if it involves the White House, a full morning for committee work. Neal isn't called to the White House nearly as much now as when Bill Clinton lived there. But he'll go anytime President Bush requests his presence. He'll also scoop up a handful of M&Ms before leaving the Oval Office.

Now and then, Neal gets a dollop of fun with his grueling committee work. He's also one of the 39 members of the House Budget Committee.

Right up to spring break, U.S. Rep. Jim Nussle, a hard-line GOP conservative from sensible Iowa, tried writing a budget with no success. It hung over the GOP leadership during the break like an unfinished dissertation of a distracted graduate student.

Well, it's not like Neal didn't try to help with the \$1.8 trillion federal budget. Neal, who is the committee's third top Democrat and serves with the likes of U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., a strident liberal, and the more laid-back Harold E. Ford of Tennessee, did something he found amusing. During the days running up to the Easter recess, Neal introduced Bush's budget for a committee vote. Nussle knew that no one in the House could support that spending plan, which leaves America's safety net looking more like a pair of discarded fishnet stockings after an active night of streetwalking.

Moderate Republicans like Chris Shays and Nancy Johnson of Connecticut and Mike Castle of Delaware want at least \$7 billion put back for domestic spending and have told the GOP leadership so.

The Budget Committee voted down Neal's motion and Bush's budget, "39 to zip," Neal said, laughing. "They didn't get one Republican to vote for it." A few nights later, Neal saw Castle at the House gym. Only members are allowed in. Castle told Neal he was holding firm on wanting \$7 billion back in the budget. Why would Neal introduce the president's budget? "To be a pain in the neck," he said with equal measures of pride and delight.

At 58, Neal plays basketball at the YMCA in Springfield and on Capitol Hill in the House gym. It can be an in-your-face game. He enjoys it.

Jo-Ann Moriarty is a staff writer for The Republican who covers Washington, D.C. If you have questions related to the Western Massachusetts congressional delegation or issues being addressed by the U.S. House and Senate, please send them to pluspapers@repub.com, attention: A View from the Hill; be sure to include your name and a daytime telephone number.