

Months of characteristic doggedness paid off last week for Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) when he appeared to accomplish a feat his own leaders have struggled to match: backing a muscular Democratic majority into a corner, then getting it to fold.

Aiming to head off Flake's latest attempt to force an ethics committee investigation of the defunct lobbying firm PMA Group and its ties to senior Democrats, the majority on Wednesday overwhelmingly called for the ethics panel to disclose whether it is probing the matter.

Flake could have declared victory and moved on. Instead, the anti-earmark crusader, who has carved out a niche as an equal-opportunity antagonist on the issue of targeted spending provisions, said he is just getting started.

"The endgame was never just to have the ethics committee investigate," Flake said. "The endgame is to stop this practice of allowing individual Members to award no-bid contracts to their campaign contributors, and until that practice stops, we've got to move ahead."

With the appropriations season humming to life, Flake and his staff are combing through lists of earmark requests to identify projects he hopes to challenge on the House floor.

Last week, he sent a letter to the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct asking it to make clear that campaign contributions constitute a financial interest for lawmakers requesting earmarks. He said he will push the change through legislation if the panel is unreceptive.

And, with Rep. Ron Kind (D-Wis.), Flake is trying to drum up support for what would amount to a game-changer for earmarking: altogether banning projects for private companies.

And as for the PMA scandal, the five-term Arizonan said the effect of the Democrats' move last week remains to be seen. Flake joined Republican leaders in criticizing Democrats for simply referring their measure to the ethics committee instead of approving it outright and forcing the panel to disclose within 45 days whether it has taken action in the case.

Democrats acknowledged their move does not require the panel to act, but they argued it sent

an unmistakable signal. "The procedure may seem odd, but there is no doubt that the message was very clear," House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) told reporters Thursday. "And the message is: This is a serious matter raising serious questions and ought to be looked at."

Flake, for the time being, appears willing to take Hoyer at his word. He consulted with Hoyer twice over the past several months to discuss the issue and described him as seeming "at least sympathetic to what I'm doing."

In the wake of the Democratic gambit last week, Flake pulled his ninth attempt at forcing an investigation. But he said he is not yet sure how long he will hold his fire.

"We'll see," he said. If the ethics committee does not act "pretty soon," or if he hears Democratic leaders backtracking on their call for action, he said he would consider offering the Democrats' own resolution himself, without the 45-day grace period.

Assisting his effort is the fact that the scandal itself has now built up a head of steam. Flake launched his push in late February after the revelations that PMA and a Pennsylvania contractor backed by Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) were raided by federal investigators. The lawmaker peeled off a steadily increasing number of Democrats as the scandal continued to make headlines. The most explosive yet came over the Memorial Day recess when Rep. Peter Visclosky (D-Ind.), a close Murtha ally, acknowledged that his offices and some staffers had been subpoenaed as part of a federal grand jury probe of the firm and its ties to lawmakers.

While Flake's drive on the PMA scandal has provided ready fodder for his party's campaign committee, the lawmaker said he has labored to keep the effort nonpartisan. He said he has not coordinated with his own party leaders and has, in fact, reached out to a range of Democrats.

Beyond the talks with Hoyer, Flake said his office has sometimes called Democrats who have voted with him on the matter to give them a heads-up about his next attempt. And he said he recently talked to President Barack Obama to try to enlist his support for a ban on earmarks for private companies.

"He's aware of the problem, and he's certainly cognizant of the political issues as well," Flake said, jokingly adding that he is not looking to help Democrats with the politics of the matter.

But the comment points to a defining element of Flake's fight: If his earnestness has won him credit across the aisle, it has also stirred wariness, if not outright suspicion, in his own ranks.

His GOP colleagues recognize he has struck on a winning issue for their party, but they are hardly ready to hoist him on their shoulders.

"He's a crusader, and crusaders often are not popular with the leader," one GOP aide said. "That said, the leader has punished him severely in the past while not doing so to others."

Flake's tendency to break with his party has played a role in the denial of several committee slots. In 2008, his run for the House Appropriations Committee seat vacated by now-Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) was rejected by the House Republican Steering Committee.

Rep. Kay Granger (R-Texas) was so opposed to his candidacy that she told him that she would sooner see a Democrat fill the seat when he asked for her support.

Flake's office denied the incident occurred at the time, while Granger said she was joking with her colleague.

In 2007, Flake said his stance on immigration reform led to his removal from the House Judiciary Committee. Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) has denied this was the case, saying that the Democratic takeover of the House simply left fewer seats on the committee.

**Fellow earmark opponent Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.) said it was too early to tell what the resolution could do for Flake inside the Conference.**

**"I think it's hard not to respond to someone as principled and tenacious as he is even if you don't always agree with what he's doing," Campbell said. "He's done it all by himself.**

**Campbell said the popularity of the PMA gambit will draw more attention to the need for earmark reform. But he said he was unsure that anything substantive would occur as a result of the raised public awareness.**

Flake struck a more hopeful note.

"I think a lot of Members would like to return to a Congress that had more substantive debates and relevant debates, and they don't like having to go beg at the Appropriations Committee and be then beholden to those they got the earmarks from," he said. "And so while sometimes I don't get much support on the floor for some of these amendments, I get a lot more support in private from people saying, 'Keep going.' And that's why it doesn't get tiring."