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The political pulse

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Section D

The congressional scene

Symms backs dipping into tax break fund

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Sen. Steve Symms, D-Idaho, who is taking full advantage of a tax break that permits \$75 per day for members of Congress while Congress is in session, Wednesday defended the practice.

Symms based his defense primarily on the grounds that he paid \$27,148 federal income taxes on a 1981 gross adjusted income of \$89,826. In addition, he paid a state income tax of \$32,121.

Symms is the only member of the Idaho delegation to take the maximum, compared with \$50 per day for Sen. James A. McClure, \$20 for 1st District Congressman Larry Craig and none for 2nd District Congressman George Hansen.

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Symms, records show, is the wealthiest member of the Idaho congressional delegation. He has family farm holdings near Caldwell, plus other assets.

This special tax break amounts to about \$19,000 per year for the rigors of having to live in Washington, an advantage no one else enjoys. It is in addition to their \$60,000 per year salary, plus many generous medical, pension, traveling and other benefits.

Symms, after reporting what he has to pay in federal income tax, said "almost every member of Congress has a second home in Washington. The interest and taxes on those homes have always been tax-deductible, but under new rules members of Congress may now deduct the cost in one of three ways."

He then lists as three options of taking a flat \$75 per day deduction for every day that Congress is in session, instead of deducting taxes and interest on the Washington home; taking a deduction of \$50 a day, plus the cost of interest

and taxes; or taking an unlimited deduction for all living expenses in Washington.

"I chose the first option which actually saved me about \$4,500, not the \$19,200 that some of the media have been taking about," he said. "Some of my colleagues who chose the second or third option probably saved more money than I did."

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Symms then said he had no apologies for taking the tax break, declaring he is turning over more than a third of his income to the tax collection.

"I have always voted against every proposal to give members of Congress automatic pay increases tied to the Cost of Living Index. If those proposals had passed, members of the House and Senate would now be receiving salaries of \$112,00 per year."

Symms said in his statement "the people of Idaho know how I feel about pending and taxes. For 10 years now, I have been fighting in Washington to keep the back-breaking burden of big government from becoming even heavier."

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Symms also took a crack at House Speaker Tip O'Neill, yet takes advantage of the tax break of which O'Neill apparently was one of the leading advocates.

Said Symms, "despite the fact that my annual tax bill is big enough to provide Tip O'Neill with a 20-year supply of Havana cigars, I've been catching flak from some of the media and a few of my constituents. They seem to think I've taken 'loophole' to escape from paying my fair share of taxes."

Common Cause, the volunteer citizen organization that keeps an eye on members of Congress on legislation and activities intended to benefit themselves, has launched a nationwide campaign to revoke the law passed in the last session.