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Drunken sailors seize the ship of state

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James Gill

To say that Louisiana government spends money like a drunken sailor would be a slander on drunken sailors.

A seaman stumbling from bar to bar is a model of financial prudence compared with the custodians of the public fisc in Baton Rouge.

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Legislators right now are surpassing themselves in reckless spending, while Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who promised a little restraint, has suddenly gone all wobbly.

The state operating budget, which ballooned from \$12 billion to \$16 billion a year in the eight years of the Foster administration, has accelerated its ascent into the stratosphere under Blanco. It is now nudging \$19 billion.

Baton Rouge is awash in cash, but bills to raise taxes are snaking their way through the Legislature. Meanwhile, a scheme is afoot to raid the state's rainy day fund for another gigantic government spending spree.

What should we do with a drunken sailor? Run him for state office. That way we'd be much better off.

Of public outrage there has been barely a sign, and our prodigal politicians must think they have

us fooled. Maybe they have. Just the other day a headline in this very newspaper read, "Cash-strapped La. faces Saints, Hornets bill; State may be short by \$10 million."

State government is cash-strapped? Sure, and Bill Gates will work for food.

Pork added to the operating budget by House members this week -- for such vital projects as a hot air balloon championship and an oil and gas museum in Oil City -- totaled \$16 million.

Yet now Blanco may throw her weight behind a bill increasing the hotel-motel tax to provide sweeteners for sports franchises because the state allegedly cannot afford this year's installment.

Not even a drunken sailor would believe that.

Thanks to rising oil and gas prices state government has just picked up a windfall of \$715 million dollars, of which \$360 million goes to the general fund and can thus be disbursed at whim. The politicians are getting rid of it as fast as they can, and they still want more.

A Senate committee has just approved a bill that is projected to free up a few hundred million more in whoopee money by reducing the rainy day fund to a level that the Public Affairs Research Council deems too low to be "useful in a serious economic downturn." And still the cry goes up for more money.

All those assurances that teacher raises were to take priority turn out to have been the usual political blather. Legislators promptly earmarked gobs of our newfound wealth to restore their own infamous slush funds, and to subsidize empty beds in nursing homes owned by friends and supporters.

But if teachers are to get a raise that will bring them within hailing distance of the Southern average, cigarette taxes must go up by \$1 a pack, Blanco says.

Blanco approached this session with a plan to cut nursing homes by \$60 million. That, admittedly, was before the Revenue Estimating Conference discovered the extra money, but Blanco did not suggest the cuts because we were broke. They were part of a plan to shift the emphasis from soulless institutions to home care.

Now, with Blanco's blessing, the Legislature has restored most of the nursing home moolah, which two recent studies found excessive. This is no less of a rip-off just because the state has more revenue than it expected. But when the state is flush, the politicians will find a way to waste the money before they consider giving it back to the taxpayer.

Blanco has also proved a weak reed on the slush funds, which her office makes available for legislators to spend in their districts as they see fit. Last year that little boondoggle cost taxpayers \$16 million, and Blanco started out with the intention of cutting it by half. But she acquiesced when legislators made it known they wanted the full amount restored.

A drunken sailor would never be so irresponsible, but then he would be spending his own money.

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