

The Detroit News

Shut down the welfare-warfare state

By: Doug Bandow – October 8, 2013

The GOP is attempting to defund Obamacare by holding the federal government hostage. Congressional Republicans say: Cut the spending or Uncle Sam will have to stay home.

Unfortunately, while the public doesn't favor President Barack Obama's plan to nationalize American health care, people seem even less enthused about Republican attempts to govern like the monkey wrench gang. Better would be a threat to close down the government because the government should be shuttered. The GOP should seek to eliminate entire programs and agencies.

Federal control of health care is a good place to start. The U.S. medical system is a mess, but the government should not decide who gets how much health insurance in what form through whom.

Corporate welfare should be another target. Export subsidies, research grants, farm subsidies, housing aid, regulatory preferences and more. Capitalists long have been among the worst enemies of capitalism, showing up in Washington only to announce "I'm for free enterprise, but" A serious assault on corporate welfare should involve closing the Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, and Housing Departments, to start.

There's no better reason to underwrite smaller enterprises, through the Small Business Administration. Is there really a critical scarcity of liquor stores requiring taxpayers to pay for additional ones?

Some tasks just aren't Washington's job. The Department of Housing and Urban Development is an important fount of corporate welfare, enriching developers. Moreover, worrying about the construction of apartments and homes should be left to localities and states.

Another unnecessary bureaucracy is the Department of Education. The national government shouldn't be trying to run local schools. That's what school boards, cities and states are for.

Subsidizing university education is even more foolish. If there is a broad social benefit to education, it occurs at the most basic levels. Why should lower-income taxpayers subsidize middle-class kids who want to become lawyers?

Even when Uncle Sam can claim a legitimate role, he almost always goes too far. Grant the federal government authority to create parks involving uniquely scenic or otherwise special lands. There's still no reason for the Interior Department to own and manage hundreds of millions of acres of forest and range land. These holdings would be better off in private hands.

The Department of Defense possesses — at the sufferance of foreign governments — hundreds of properties abroad.

While there's a security argument for maintaining cooperative relationships with foreign militaries, the U.S. has no need for innumerable facilities and garrisons around the globe.

The Europeans have ten times the GDP and three times the population of Russia. South Korea has 40 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea. The U.S. should act as a back-up against the rare hegemonic threat that friendly states cannot handle, rather than the guardian against every mundane controversy and conflict that arises elsewhere.

Foreign facilities often are justified as logistical way stations for intervening in the Middle East or Central Asia. However, Europe should provide the troops (as well as the bases) to deal with such hot spots as Egypt and Syria, which are far closer to that continent. It would not be isolationism for America to more humbly and prudently engage the world.

Foreign aid should go the way of military intervention. While even humanitarian assistance can have counterproductive impacts, economic assistance has been a grand failure, doing more to subsidize debilitating collectivism than promote economic reform and growth.

There's much at the Justice Department that should be eliminated. Federal criminal law has exploded. In some cases, Congress creates offenses best left to localities and states. In others, Washington makes crimes out of actions that should be left to civil punishment — environmental disputes, for instance. Federal lawyers also have become the vanguard of political correctness, enforcing a racial spoils system under the guise of promoting affirmative action.

Other federal sacred cows also deserve challenge. In a world of instantaneous communication, why does the U.S. maintain an oversized, fortified embassy in most nations? The Drug Enforcement Agency arrests people because they prefer to get intoxicated with drugs rather than alcohol. There are scores of welfare and job training programs of dubious effectiveness.

While many people are criticizing Republicans for threatening to close the government over Obamacare, there actually is good reason to go to the brink on shrinking the leviathan.