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Column: How to reform institutions

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In the film “Girl, Interrupted,” the character played by Winona Ryder is watching TV in a psychiatric hospital. There is a news report about a demonstration and the narrator says: “We live in troubled times. The institutions we once trusted no longer seem reliable.”

As I begin the laborious process of doing my income taxes, I am again reminded — thanks to withholding and other payments I must make to the government — that I am paying for so many things that aren’t working. The D.C. that follows Washington could easily stand for “dysfunctional city.”

What other institution, or business, could long survive with such a record of failure? Would a car dealer who consistently sells lemons be in business for long? Would a fast-food chain continue to attract customers if the hamburger meat was tainted and they became ill?

Only the federal government endures with no requirement that it function effectively and efficiently. As Ronald Reagan quipped, “a government bureau is the nearest thing to eternal life we’ll ever see on this earth.” He also observed: “No government ever voluntarily reduces itself in size.”

Six weeks before the 1994 election, Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) published a “Contract with America.” Among other things it promised voters that if they gave Republicans a House majority for the first time in 40 years, Republicans would “select a major, independent auditing firm to conduct a comprehensive audit of Congress for waste, fraud or abuse.”

Asked about it, Gingrich responded in an email: “We promised to audit the House. We brought in PricewaterhouseCoopers. After a year they reported that they couldn’t audit the House (because) there were no coherent records. We then hired them to build a system that could be audited and since then there has been a transparent audit every year.”

Unfortunately that has not been enough to stem the growth of government under either party.

A November 13, 2000, article by Edward H. Crane, president of the libertarian Cato Institute, said, “...the combined budgets of the 95 major programs that the Contract with America promised to eliminate have increased by 13 percent.”

Congressman Paul Ryan (R-WI) noted in 2011, “Since taking office President Obama has signed into law spending increases of nearly 25 percent for domestic government agencies -- an 84 percent increase when you include the failed stimulus. All of this new government spending was sold as ‘investment.’”

If the Republican presidential candidates want to capture voters’ attention in this turbulent and unpredictable election season, they should compose a new contract with voters. Every federal agency and program either has a charter that established it and/or authorizing legislation in which its purpose is stated. Heads of those agencies should periodically be required to come before Congress and justify, not just their budgets, but their existence. Are they living up to the charter or legislation that created their agency? If not, at least three options present themselves: 1) Downsize the agencies and reduce their budgets to the size commensurate with whatever success they are having; 2) privatize the agencies or 3) eliminate them.

There remains a strain of the Puritan ethic in most Americans that begins with parents telling their children to eat their food because there are starving people in the world who don’t have access to such nourishment. Not wasting money is also a part of that ethic.

First, though, we must get beyond the notion of “entitlement” and back to what our ancestors taught about personal responsibility with government as a last resort, not a first resource. That is going to take something akin to a spiritual awakening because government is not about to shrink itself or give up the power it has over the lives of its citizens.

Perhaps a good starting point would be to consult the wisdom of Thomas Jefferson, who Democrats like to claim as the first Democrat. In a letter to Thomas Cooper, dated November 29, 1802, Jefferson said: “if we can but prevent the government from wasting the labours of the people, under the pretence of taking care of them, they must become happy.”

During what has been described as a “revolutionary” campaign season, the pitchfork brigade might consider among their demands chopping off the heads of a lot of unnecessary and costly government agencies.