

Commentary

Government Can't Create Value

The government cannot convey worth through funding.

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March 17, 2017

For a document that amounts to little more than a positioning statement, President Donald Trump's proposed budget has inspired an inordinate amount of passion. The dudgeon frenzy on the left over the president's effort to curb and cut discretionary spending (e.g., the 40 percent of the budget that isn't dedicated to entitlements, anti-poverty programs, or servicing the debt) has been predictably overwrought. There are specific complaints about the nature of Trump's cuts that deserve thought and examination. To the extent that liberals offer a philosophical justification for their opposition to Trump's proposal, though, it is based in their embarrassment over the fact that a budget is an expression of priorities—and America's priorities, they contend, are all wrong. This is logic borne of a fallacy.

Over the last 24-hours, the left has zeroed in on two lines of attack on Trump's budget: opposition to cuts to the Meals on Wheels program through Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and to the endowments for the arts and humanities. These are specious arguments on both substantive and philosophical grounds. In fact, by resting their case on these two items, Democrats have unwittingly made conservatism's case for conservatives.

When it comes to Meals on Wheels, the program that feeds 2.4 million elderly Americans would, under Trump's budget, have to do without the 3 percent of its funding it receives through the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) and the CDBG program. As the Cato Institute's Walter Olson observed, 35 percent of Meals on Wheels' federal funding comes from the yet-untouched Older Americans Act. The vast majority of the program's budget (84 percent) is derived from corporate and foundation grants and individual contributions. We'll get back to that later.

As for the arts and humanities, the most sacrosanct element of the federal budget is the minuscule portion that is dedicated to public broadcasting—National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). It isn't hard to find liberal activists and reporters bemoaning the GOP's manic desire to send Big Bird to the gallows. This tired trope has been deployed by Democrats in every election cycle since 1980, but it also reveals how little Sesame Street they consume. That treasured children's program has for the last two years called the subscription cable network HBO its home, not PBS. It seems the marketplace has granted Big Bird a reprieve.

PBS only draws about 15 percent of its revenues from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (which operates PBS and NPR affiliates). NPR only gets 2 percent of its revenues from grants issued by CPB. “According to this CPB report, most revenue to both public radio and television (about 59 percent) consists of donations from individuals, corporate underwriters, and private grants, followed by state and local support (roughly 20 percent),” Pro Publica reported in 2012. Anyone who has ever spent a substantial amount of time watching PBS programming or listening to an NPR broadcast knows this means support from charitable foundations, corporate donations, and “viewers like you.”

But that’s beside the point, say Democrats. You can judge a society by what it values, and those values are itemized in the federal budget. Trump’s America is, they add, one that privileges the military and the domestic security apparatus over protecting its most vulnerable members and promoting the more enriching elements of human existence, like the arts. This is a foundational distinction between right and left, and an indication that the left has a flawed understanding of government.

Government cannot create value. Only individuals through their actions can demonstrate that which has objective value. The only instrument through which government can induce or compel is through the threat of force. The redistribution of taxpayer income is an act of force, not an acknowledgment of existing value. Taxation is forfeiture; the seizure of assets that were secured as the result of—optimally—creating or doing something that someone else found valuable. Government isn’t bestowing value onto something it funds via the distribution of tax dollars; it’s robbing something else of its value.

Now, a militant Randian fanatic would end the argument there, declare taxation to be theft, and retreat to their militia camp in the wilderness to await the final reckoning with Big Brother. Anti-taxation absolutism is the kind of theory that becomes exponentially less appealing with every minute spent away from the late-night dorm-room debate session. Still, those on the left who would defer to government their obligation to charity and society are engaged in some transparent projection. If they value something, they alone are obliged to patronize and support it.

Those on the left who are today scolding the genuinely charitable for not sharing their priorities are indulging in solipsism. Meals on Wheels does have value, as does NPR and PBS: those who consume and donate to its services demonstrate that every day. If that which Democrats say they value is of real worth, it—like Big Bird—can survive the tempestuousness of the marketplace.