



If You Love Public Broadcasting, Set it Free

By Trevor Burrus - 10/11/2012

The case for defunding public broadcasting is very simple. First, public broadcasting does not need federal money. Before the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, noncommercial broadcasting thrived. National Educational Television, which eventually merged with PBS, was largely funded through grants from foundations such as the Ford Foundation. Currently, public broadcasting only receives about 15 percent of its budget from federal funding. The rest comes from corporations, foundations, and viewers like us.

Second, our media-rich environment has obviated the need for public broadcasting. Even before the Internet, which provides seemingly unlimited educational and cultural content, cable channels such as Discovery and Bravo had already pushed aside public broadcasting as the premier provider of educational programming. The government should only use the hard-earned money of taxpayers to fund things that would not exist otherwise. In 1967, it was argued that, with only 3 channels available to most people, there was nowhere to see educational programming. Now, no one can reasonably claim this.

Finally, because of federal funding, public broadcasting is both more than it should be and less than it could be. It is more than it should be insofar as it is an institution that subsidizes certain opinions at the expense of others. Creationists, global warming skeptics, and socialists, just to name a few, do not get "equal time" on public broadcasting. Perhaps, as a matter of journalistic standards, they should not get equal time, but there is no reason that those holding divergent viewpoints should be forced to contribute to an institution that marginalizes their own deeply held beliefs.

And federal money makes public broadcasting less than it could be because the constant threat of losing funding continually forces public broadcasters to sanitize their content to avoid political backlash. In short, public broadcasters dangle at the end of a politicized tether, and they are constantly wary that they will offend the wrong people. After the controversy over Juan Williams's dismissal, NPR fired CEO Vivian Schiller and executive Ellen Weiss. Weiss joined NPR in 1982 and was credited as one of the formative creative talents that gave NPR its "NPR-ness." Schiller had been an effective manager who oversaw a consistently growing audience. Both were sacrificed for political reasons—hardly the behavior of an "independent" institution.

If you, like me, love public broadcasting, then set it free.