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M.D. Harmon: Reduce spending by reducing money to spend ... GSA! GSA! GSA!

By M.D. Harmon

As an expression of justifiable national pride (egad, I almost wrote the P-word!), the often-heard chant, "USA! USA! USA!" is uplifting and stirring.

So in that high-spirited tradition, I would not have been surprised to see, in news reports about our party-hearty General Services Administration's leaders playing around at a Las Vegas resort, coverage of a rally at which attendees would be chanting, "GSA! GSA! GSA!"

They had plenty of reasons to celebrate -- more than 800,000 of them, in fact, in taxpayer dollars spent to hold brief "business meetings" and "award sessions" so that the rest of their copious paid vacation could be spent sipping wine while soaking in hot tubs, as the viral photo of GSA's top honcho demonstrates vividly.

But workers for the GSA -- which is the agency that supervises how the government spends our money, cough, snort, giggle, guffaw -- are not the only government employees who know how to get down.

So we found that 11 Secret Service agents (and possibly some military personnel) assigned to provide security for President Obama's visit to Colombia used funds allocated for housing expenses to engage the services of what one wag called "ladies of negotiable affection."

The whole thing came to public notice when one of the horizontal performance artists took a dispute over an unpaid bill so seriously that the police were called.

The agents' disregard for their duty (not to mention their jobs, health and other relationships) raised justifiable concerns over compromised security.

The notice the scandal brought also provided a little boost to Obama's comment to other regional leaders gathered for the Summit of the Americas that he was in Cartagena partially to scout out new vacation spots for his wife and children.

Since various members of the first family have averaged one vacation for every 38 days in office, tax- and gas-price burdened Americans (at least, the ones who still have jobs) were likely not amused, since Costa del Sol, Hawaii and even Martha's Vineyard are a bit beyond most budgets this year.

As the late free-market and Nobel-prize-winning economist Milton Friedman said repeatedly, no one spends other people's money as carefully as he spends his own, something blogger Roger Pilon noted Tuesday on the Cato Institute's website.

Pilon said that, however imperfectly this matrix fits, Democrats are the party that turns to government as a first resort and Republicans are the party that turns to government as a last resort, preferring to empower individuals instead. Yes, I know there are tons of exceptions. But, so far, at least, they are exceptions. Let's continue voting to keep them that way.

Speaking of Friedman, when I wrote a column recently saying that if the famous Labor Department mural has to stay because it is "government art" (as if such a thing could exist), then Republicans should post his visage, along with those of Ronald Reagan, Barry Goldwater and William F. Buckley, on all four sides of the State House, where Democrats could never remove them.

I then got an email from a non-fan who said, "If you want to do that, then you'd probably want to erect a statue of Paul LePage there, too!"

Gee, now that you mention it

Perhaps the statue idea came a bit closer to reality when the governor took GOP lawmakers to task for caring more about Democrats' spending programs, even though Republicans rule both houses, than about taxpayers' interests.

As an example, \$14 million in new revenue was partially used to restore \$1.7 million in funding to Maine Public Broadcasting, the elitist news and entertainment service that should be the last entity in the state to get money from impoverished taxpayers.

Anyway, LePage refused to sign the legislative budget, instead using his line-item veto to cut spending on duplicative welfare programs that have grown by leaps and bounds in recent years.

Subsequent comments that he is casting those expenses on local governments will be true only if municipalities choose to spend the money. If they don't, there will be no effect on local tax rates at all.

There may only be one man in Augusta who cares about taxpayers' interests, but his courage certainly deserves commemoration in statuary (as well as statutory) form.

In related news, Maine taxpayer groups meeting in Lewiston last Sunday vowed to bring a new version of the Taxpayer Bill of Rights to voters. True, Mainers have turned down two prior attempts, but if same-sex marriage can keep coming back, why not tax and spending limits?

As was suggested on *As Maine Goes*, a conservative blog, perhaps people gathering "TABOR III" signatures could also take \$5 donations for the LePage statue.

As Milton Friedman also said many times, the most effective way to cut government spending is to reduce the amount of money available to government to spend.

Without cutting the cost of government, we know what the future will be like.

C'mon, chant along with me: "GSA! GSA! GSA!"

M.D. Harmon, a retired journalist and military officer, is a free-lance writer. He can be contacted at:

mdharmoncol@yahoo.com