



Big Bird's fuzzy defenders march on Washington

If we can't cut tiny PBS, we can't cut anything. Democrats and Republicans have worked together to wall off almost all spending.

Trevor Burrus - October 30th, 2012

This weekend, just days before the presidential election, we're still going to be talking about Big Bird and the federal budget. That's when the latest fallout from Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's debate quip about cutting funding for public broadcasting will hit the streets of Washington in the form of a "Million Puppet March" (more like 1,000 puppeteers), which will descend upon the National Mall to protest the mere mention of cuts.

That raises the question whether we can cut even a single item from the federal budget, or will we just ride our growing \$16 trillion debt until the inevitable day of reckoning? That is what the debate over cutting federal funding from public broadcasting is about — not Big Bird, *All Things Considered*, or *NOVA*. Those things will almost assuredly continue to exist if federal funding, which is only 15% of public broadcasting's budget, is taken away. Yes, the total federal money given to public broadcasting is literally a rounding error in the federal budget, and yes, public broadcasting produces some excellent programming. Nevertheless, if we cannot cut funding from something that doesn't even need federal funds to exist, then we are truly unprepared to meet the serious budget challenges that lie ahead.

Democrats and Republicans are, of course, equally culpable in running to the barricades to protect the status quo level of spending time and time again. Each side has its sacred cows and, between the two, it seems that nearly all the federal government's budget is off-limits from serious cutting. This is an untenable and dangerous position that only guarantees eventual fiscal collapse.

The Big Bird fracas illustrates how out of touch with reality our budget fights have become. In the first presidential debate, Mitt Romney called out public broadcasting, specifically Big Bird, as something he would cut because "I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for." In response, President Obama's campaign launched a tongue-in-cheek ad attacking Romney's focus on *Sesame Street* rather than on Wall Street corruption and cronyism (*Sesame Street* later asked the campaign to take the ad down).

Standing in the cross hairs, as it has so many times before, is public broadcasting. Since its inception, public broadcasting has been attacked by both the left and the right as inadequately serving its mission to broadcast in the "public interest."

Mandatory mush

As a result of such constant attacks — Romney's comments being just the latest — public broadcasting sits in a pool of mediocrity, constantly chastised and chided and thus unable to truly push any boundaries lest it steps on the wrong toes. It is both more than it should be and less than it could be. More than it should be because no one should be forced to subsidize views with which they disagree, and less than it could be because constant threats to its funding creates programming that is more sanitized and bland than it would be otherwise.

This is not mere supposition.

Before the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, non-commercial broadcasting thrived. Because it took no federal money, National Educational Television was able to run hard-hitting documentaries that challenged the status quo with titles such as *Who Invited US?*, *The Poor Pay More*, *Black Like Me* and *Inside North Vietnam*. The dirty secret of public broadcasting is that initially, federal funding was partially given as a way to make the message more palatable to government. Much of this history has been forgotten. For 45 years, public broadcasting has given us many hours of high-quality programming and some memorable moments. Thousands of people work for public broadcasting, and millions enjoy its programming.

Fundraising boom

And almost none of that has to go away. The announcement that federal funding would be drawn down over a five-year period would create the largest fundraising boom in public broadcasting's history. Foundations, corporate underwriters and viewers like us would dig deep to keep it going because it is worth our hard-earned money, voluntarily given. What would remain is a fully independent, non-commercial entity that depends

on the generosity of people to keep going, which, save 15%, is essentially what we have now.

Yes, some things will change. Rural stations that are more dependent on federal money might have to shut down. Some people will lose their jobs. Even so, if we are not prepared to accept these inevitable consequences, then we are unprepared to seriously examine a dangerously bloated federal budget that is pushing us quickly over the edge into fiscal oblivion. After all, ending any federal program will eliminate jobs and drastically change some people's lives.

This basic truth is paralyzing Greece's attempts to pull itself out of fiscal quicksand. As Greece has learned, cutting government programs too late can lead to dire consequences and rioting far more severe than 1,000 perturbed puppeteers. Unless we face these truths head-on, then a future like Greece's is inevitable. Let's keep that from happening, and to show that we can do it, let's start with Big Bird.