

Tomorrow's 'tea parties' founded on fiction

Jim Fisher

Tuesday, April 14, 2009

Did everyone notice what appeared next to the story about tomorrow's tax-denouncing "tea parties" in the Northwest section of Sunday's Lewiston Tribune? It was a report about the loss of weekly mail delivery to backcountry Idaho ranches by small plane.

If you don't see the connection, you need a refresher course on governmental enterprises, and how they are financed.

The U.S. Postal Service is currently underwritten by sale of "postal products," primarily postage stamps, but that is largely the result of the kind of tax phobia that will be on display during well-orchestrated demonstrations across the nation tomorrow, the day federal income tax filings are due. Formerly, the service functioned as an ordinary, tax-supported agency of the federal government. In 1970, it was turned into a quasi-governmental organization and instructed to get by on its own sales only, plus government reimbursement for the free mailing the government grants to itself and some others.

As competition for many services the Postal Service provides has grown, and as e-mail and other electronic communication media have flourished, the enterprise has been hit hard economically. So it is now cutting back.

Backcountry mail service is just one of the first victims. Six-day-a-week delivery probably will be among the next.

Although no one expects the Postal Service to be incorporated back with other tax-supported programs, its current status is a good sign of how off-kilter these tea parties are. Organized by groups like the Republican Party - Idaho Republicans boasted of their involvement Monday - the demonstrations are intended to gull Americans into believing they are overtaxed.

"People are getting taxed to death," Wayne Hoffman of the Idaho Freedom Foundation wrote in Sunday's Idaho Statesman.

Baloney. Not only are Americans paying too little to finance the government services they currently enjoy, thereby driving the nation further into debt, but they are paying less income tax than they have for most of the last half-century.

According to Treasury Department statistics, today's income tax burden for a family of four with a median income is about what it was in 1955. And during most of the years between then and now, it has been higher.

Now is not the time to raise it, but only because the nation is experiencing a severe economic recession. The best response to that is government spending, lots of it.

But when the economy does turn around, the country must either raise enough money to pay for its programs - including the big entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security - or invite more ruinous debt.

Why not reduce the size of government instead? Where? With 84 percent of the federal budget going to defense, homeland security, those popular entitlements and interest on the debt we already have, which gets the ax first?

Demonstrating against taxation makes as much sense as demonstrating against the wind. Its futility proves its foolishness. - J.F.