

Getting the Bird

By Dan Hammes/St. Maries Gazette-Record

There is no coherent way to spin President Obama's miserable performance in last week's debate with Mitt Romney.

But that did not stop his supporters from trying.

Al Gore claimed our President suffered from oxygen deprivation. The debate, after all, was in the Mile High City. Everyone knows athletes can suffer in thin air at higher elevations so – according to Mr. Gore – it only stands to reason that an Olympian-caliber talker like President Obama would not perform as well as expected.

The theory posed by Mr. Gore is that President Obama did not have time to acclimate himself to the higher elevation and therefore had trouble gathering his thoughts to present coherent arguments during the 90-minute debate.

Mr. Gore went on to explain that the same malady did not affect Mr. Romney because Mr. Romney had done his debate prep in Denver and was therefore acclimated.

If nothing else, the former vice-president is consistent.

His 'oxygen deprivation' theory as it relates to President Obama is no more bizarre than his other more renowned theories.

Other Obama supporters were not nearly as imaginative when it came to their defense of President Obama.

They blamed the moderator.

Their theory is that Jim Lehrer did not do enough to keep the debate 'fair.' While this is a considerable improvement over Al Gore's explanation for President Obama's slipshod effort, it also falls short. President Obama spoke a full four minutes longer (and yes, people do keep track of such things) than Mitt Romney. Even if, by the wildest stretch, Mr. Lehrer was somehow unfair to President Obama, he did allow the President ample time to defend himself. Something he - the President not Mr. Lehrer - failed to do.

Perhaps the best defense of the President Obama's fumbling effort came in the form of a cartoon character.

In answer to a question from Mr. Lehrer about spending cuts, Mr. Romney said the United States can no longer afford government television. He said he would cut the subsidy to Public Broadcasting – of which Mr. Lehrer is a recipient. He specifically mentioned Big Bird, one of a multitude of popular characters on the long-running program, Sesame Street.

Some supporters of the President used the 'attack' on Big Bird as a way, through jokes or anguished pleas for educational (their word) programming, to demonstrate what a terrible threat a Romney Administration would pose to the Republic.

Yes, American politics has become this silly. An imaginary children's character becomes an issue in a presidential campaign.

The problem is the joke is on the U.S. taxpayer.

Consider the following numbers and you begin to realize just how lucrative the tax-subsidized "Sesame Street" franchise really is:

\$956,513

Annual salary paid to Gary Knell, the president and CEO of Sesame Workshop.

\$211 million

Sales of "Sesame Street" toys and consumer products from 2003 through 2006 – or more than \$50 million in additional, very profitable, revenue every year.

\$450 million

Amount of tax subsidy given to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Yet despite the obvious commercial success of "Sesame Street," defenders of public television believe the government should borrow money from the Chinese and continue to subsidize it.

Government TV is not alone when it comes to questionable ways. In the face of trillion-dollar deficits, here are a few items politicians bought with your money last year:

- \$113,227 for video game preservation.
- \$550,000 for a documentary on how rock music contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- \$10 million for the remake of "Sesame Street" for Pakistan.
- \$350,000 to support an International Art Exhibit in Venice, Italy.
- \$764,825 to study how college students use mobile devices for social networking.
- \$75,000 to promote awareness of the role Michigan plays in producing Christmas trees and poinsettias.

And on and on and on.

We know we face fiscal cliff disaster in this country. Nothing can be done unless our leaders muster the courage to address problems with Social Security and Medicare. Yet when a candidate questions whether a cartoon character, and the millionaires who created it, should continue to get a tax subsidy, liberals screech foul.

No matter how you spin it, there is no explanation for that performance. - *Dan Hammes*