

Time to release Big Bird from gov't aid

By Wayne Hoffman/Idaho Freedom Foundation

Let's consider Big Bird a canary in the coal mine of government waste. If Big Bird is still alive—or at least still living off the government's largess—after the politicians have done their level best to slim down the government, it will be obvious that the grownups in Washington, D.C., haven't gotten serious about deficit spending.

All this to say Mitt Romney was partly correct about Big Bird when he brought up the Sesame Street character in the presidential debate recently. He actually didn't go far enough, perhaps because of the constraints of the debate. Or because the position I'd like him to take might be unpopular with people who believe they have a constitutional right to taxpayer-supported Muppets. (Hint: They don't).

Tax dollars should not go to support public television, or, by extension, Big Bird. Romney was, of course, correct that the government should be willing to cut PBS no matter how much we like Big Bird and all his cohorts. But Romney used Big Bird as an anecdote to demonstrate his commitment to overturning every rock in response to the mounting government debt. Romney's critics were quick to note that the federal government's support of PBS is teeny-tiny, that the elimination of such will have a negligible impact on government spending, the annual deficit or the mounting national debt.

Where Romney and I perhaps differ is that I would cut PBS even if the federal treasury were swimming in cash. Here's why:

In order to function, government must take money from taxpayers by force or the threat of force. There are no exceptions to this rule. If you fail to pay your taxes, you risk government sanctions. If you still refuse to pay, you risk loss of your livelihood, your property, your freedom.

Therefore, every government endeavor must be prefaced with this question: "Is this expenditure so important that we as a civilized society are willing take their home or send them to jail to fund it?"

In the case of government-funded television, we're saying that the programming provided through taxpayer support is so valuable, people should be compelled to surrender their earnings to fund it. And to Romney's point, that we should be willing to borrow money from China, at the expense of our children and grandchildren, to fund the debt that comes from it.

Americans have another limitation, the U.S. Constitution, that defines the role of the federal government to few and finite functions. Nowhere in the Constitution is Big Bird. It's easy to scoff at that statement.

How about this one: Nowhere in the Constitution is education. Nowhere. Such responsibilities were always meant to be the purview of the people and their respective states.

But even if you don't buy any of the above statements and you're enamored with the "educational value" of government-funded television—it's for the children, after all—I'd have to question the efficacy of a program designed for the 1960s still being operated in the 21st century; there is no reason for it.

Today, kids and adults have myriad access to information that PBS was supposed to provide. Whether it's a dozen science and history channels on cable television or an app on your phone that distills nuggets of news and information, government television is an anachronism. We fund it simply because we always have, because taxpayers are oblivious to it, and because politicians who bring it up invite criticism, as Romney did the other day.