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## TIME TO LET THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING STAND ON ITS OWN

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The House Commerce Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Trade, and Consumer Protection currently is considering a bill to authorize appropriations for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). H.R. 2384 seeks to increase the CPB's funding from the current fiscal year (FY) 1999 level of \$250 million to \$300 million for FY 2000 and \$340 million for FY 2001 (an increase of 36 percent over FY 1999). And the bill would enable federal appropriations for the CPB to grow to as much as \$475 million by FY 2002—a 90 percent increase over current funding levels. Moreover, H.R. 2384 would grant a one-time appropriation of \$770 million over the next five years to assist the public broadcasting industry to transition into providing digital television.

This stunning potential increase in the CPB's budget would amount to an unwarranted waste of tax dollars because the organization's mission is both obsolete and redundant. A broad array of competitors offers Americans nearly identical television program options. But this proposed hike in funding is surprising because, just four years ago, Washington seriously debated reforming and even privatizing the CPB. Instead of automatically increasing the budget of an agency whose services no longer are necessary, legislators should give serious consideration to ending all federal subsidies for a service adequately provided by the free market.

**An Obsolete Mission.** Congress created the CPB under the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 to fill an

apparent need for additional sources of high-quality informational, educational, and entertainment-oriented television and radio programming. Over the past three decades, the CPB has funded a wide array of so-called noncommercial services and programs, including the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR), and many other specific projects and types of programming.

Regardless of how well policymakers and the public feel the CPB has performed, its mission is obsolete and redundant today. There now exists an endless variety of high-quality channels with entertainment, informational, and educational programs that do not rely on public funding to bring quality shows to home viewers and listeners. And the list of options providing essentially the same service as the CPB is growing rapidly. Ironically, CPB President and CEO Robert T. Coonrod makes this point eloquently on the CPB's Web site (<http://www.cpb.org>):

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Cable's spending for original production is increasing today at a rate nearly double that of public television. In addition to Discovery [Channel] and its siblings, The History Channel, Home and Garden Television, and A&E, the expansion of cable's digital tier will give birth to tens if not hundreds of new channels. What impact this tidal wave of content will have on viewers we do not know, but we can predict competition on a level we have never before contemplated.

It is this very competition, however, that makes the CPB's original mission obsolete. Not only do programming providers such as C-Span, the Disney Channel, the Food Network, Fox Family, Nickelodeon, and those Coonrod mentions offer options similar to CPB's taxpayer-subsidized programs, many alternative vendors of high-quality programming exist, including satellite television, video- and audiotapes, instructional computer programs, the Internet, and (in the very near future) high-definition digital television. In a world of proliferating options, taxpayer funding of the CPB makes little sense.

The funds that H.R. 2384 would provide the CPB to assist in its transition to digital television illustrate that the broadcasting agency has strayed far from its original mission. Although the CPB originally was viewed as a method of providing high-quality programming to lower-income Americans, most low-income families would not be able to spend thousands of dollars to purchase digitally ready, high-definition television sets to receive the new digital transmissions CPB hopes to offer.

**Commercial Appeal.** Today, the CPB is perfectly capable of standing on its own without federal funds. In fact, public funding may crowd out additional private funding today. Despite boasting a non-commercial format, CPB officials and PBS affiliates increasingly engage in overtly commercial activities, such as a mail-order catalog business, the operation of retail chain stores, and the sale of popular television and radio programs on video- or audiotapes or such program-related merchandise as

*Barney* or *Sesame Street* dolls, toys, or games. CPB and PBS products have widespread commercial appeal and profit potential that further justify ending taxpayer funding of the organization.

**Programming Balance or Bias?** So long as the CPB remains a publicly funded agency, the public's concerns over its commitment to objectivity and balance in programming will persist. Unfortunately, in the past various media watchdog groups—conservative groups in particular—have criticized particular PBS and NPR reports and programs for their obvious liberal or “big-government” bias.

Members of Congress began to question CPB's supposedly “independent” or “non-partisan” status this month, after *The Boston Globe* reported the Democratic National Committee (DNC) had sent a fundraising letter to a four-year-old boy whose mother had contributed \$40 to the local public broadcast station (WGBH-TV) in his name. When the boy's mother inquired as to how the DNC had acquired her son's name, she discovered that the station had given the DNC a list of donors in exchange for DNC mailing lists. In addition to the political concerns over this incident, such reports heighten calls for Congress to make the CPB independent and self-sufficient, so that tax dollars would not be squandered on partisan activities or on programming that many Americans might find offensive.

**Conclusion.** After 32 years, the CPB has proved successful enough to stand on its own as a high-quality programming service. Even if it once required federal funding to carry out its initial mission (which is debatable), taxpayer subsidies no longer are justified. Instead of doubling the size of the CPB's budget and allowing it to drain important funds away from other federal programs, policymakers should use the opportunity presented by H.R. 2384 to construct a comprehensive reform plan for the CPB, leading to its eventual privatization.

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