Sacred Cows of Arms, Prisons Are Milking the U.S. Budget

Ordinary cows are generally placid and quite harmless. But sacred cows can be downright fearsome, even a danger to the well-being of a nation.

It is two monstrous sacred cows, snorting and stomping and emitting mushroom clouds of gaseous propaganda, that stand in the way of a rational balanced budget that is fair to both the poor and the powerful.

Most politicians on both sides of the aisle—including President Clinton and his Republican adversaries—cringe at the thought of bringing to heel these voracious gobblers of vast feedlots of tax dollars.

Sacred Cow No. 1 is the "military/industrial complex," which Dwight D. Eisenhower, career military hero, warned against when he left the presidency in 1960.

If Clinton, Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole had the backbones to curb the bloated appetite of the military and its handmaidens in Congress, there would be no budget impasse, no shutdown of government, no need to balance the budget on the backs of the poor and infirm, no need to devastate the environment, education, workplace and food safety, drug prevention/treatment and a host of other social programs.

The most credible critic of outlandish defense spending in the wake of the Cold War is the Washington-based Center for Defense Information, a think tank run not by what Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh would be rate as mushy-minded liberals, but by three retired U.S. Navy admirals.

CDI's triad of flag officers brands as "scandalous" and "outrageous" today's defense budget, which represents 47 percent of all discretionary federal spending. That's nearly half of all discretionary tax dollars to feed the ultimate sacred cow in peacetime.

The admirals state unequivocally that we could reduce military spending by more than $500 billion over the next seven years "without jeopardizing America's status as the preeminent military power in the world." This, they say, would preclude draconian cuts proposed by Republicans in Congress "to vital domestic programs."

Sacred Cow No. 2—not yet as fat but equally formidable in its stranglehold on Congress and state legislatures—is the "prison/industrial complex" or the "punishment industry," as it is described by sociologists J. Robert Lilly and Mathieu Deflem.

The U.S. incarceration rate is the highest in the world. On any day, more than 1.5 million people are locked up. The reasons are clear. The prison propagandists, who profit from punishment extremes, have terrified the public, rigged sentencing statutes to assure an ever-increasing demand for more cells, and conned politicians into throwing tax dollars mindlessly into prison building, stuffing and staffing.

Both sacred cows are classic examples of free enterprise run amok. We implement unsound policy and practice driven by greed and the almighty buck. Billions are at stake as companies elbow each other to supply the "punishment industry." The prison-builders get ever-fatter as they graze unrestrained in the backyards of taxpayers. The prize, according to Lilly and Deflem, is $22 billion in annual sales divided among about 300 private firms.

What politicians—there are a few—will risk having the demagogues, lobbyists and editorial writers call them "soft" on national security or crime? Or will turn their backs on the cornucopia of dollars poured into their campaign coffers by these free-spending, yet sacrosanct, bovines?

So there is no rational debate on the merits, and we continue to squander billions on unneeded weapons and prisons. CDI reports that the House devoted exactly 32 minutes to its approval of the $240 billion military budget in 1994. That's $7.5 billion per minute!

Sad, isn't it, that we the people allow ourselves to be hoodwinked to this extent year after year.

Republicans in Congress, especially Gingrich and the hot-eyed freshmen, speak grandly about balancing the budget to protect our children and grandchildren. In truth, the future will be assured for some children and grandchildren—those whose parents and grandparents are members of Congress or otherwise comfortably fixed. Far greater numbers will be cast adrift in the new century.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

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