

## THE TRAGEDY OF THE CONGRESS

Whatever else it may do, Ross Perot's re-entry into the race for President has had the salutary effect of refocusing public attention on the problem of the federal deficit. Unfortunately, Perot's belief that he can solve the problem by presenting Congress with a detailed realistic plan for balancing the budget is entirely without foundation. In the absence of a constitutional amendment requiring a balance budget, any plan to curtail deficit spending is doomed to failure by the inner logic of our system of appropriations.

The nature of the problem was well-illustrated by Garrett Hardin in his 1968 article entitled "The Tragedy of the Commons." Hardin described a pasture open to all upon which many herdsmen graze cattle. Each herdsman contemplates adding an additional cow to his herd. Each additional cow uses up more of the limited pasture. However, since each herdsman gains the full benefit of the extra cow for himself but shares the cost to the pasture with all the other herdsmen, it is in his best interest to add the cow. Since this holds true for each herdsman, each adds additional cattle until the pasture is destroyed. This is the tragedy of the commons.

Now, rather than a pasture, imagine a huge pot of money labeled "federal revenue," and rather than herdsmen, imagine members of Congress. Each member of Congress contemplates spending some of the money to benefit his or her constituents or supporters. Each dollar spent uses up more of the limited revenue. However, since each member of Congress gains the full electoral benefit of serving his or her constituents or supporters but shares the public disapproval of deficit spending with all the other members of Congress, it is in the best interest of each to spend the money. Since this holds true for each member of Congress, each votes to spend money until huge deficits accrue. We might call this "the tragedy of the Congress."

Federal revenue is a commons. It stands in precisely the same relationship to the members of Congress as the pasture does to the herdsmen. And, as Hardin pointed out in his original article, the destruction of a commons cannot be avoided by an appeal to the conscience of those exploiting it.

A herdsman of good conscience who responds to an appeal to refrain from adding cattle

to the pasture voluntarily forgoes the benefits of an increased herd. However, he continues to share the costs imposed upon the pasture by his less responsible competitors who persist in increasing their herds. In this way, his conscience places him at a competitive disadvantage which will soon result in his being out of the cattle business. Those who remain will be precisely those for whom appeals to conscience have no effect and who will continue to add cattle until the pasture is destroyed. In a commons, conscience is "self-eliminating."

A conscientious member of Congress who responds to an appeal to curtail spending will voluntarily vote against spending that would benefit his or her constituents or supporters while his or her less responsible colleagues continue to bring home the bacon. Come election time, such a member is confronted with a series of 30-second commercials detailing the items he or she voted "against." In this way, his or her conscience places the member at an electoral disadvantage that is likely to result in a swift exit from the representative business. Even if not defeated at the polls, it is the conscientious member that is more likely to leave Congress voluntarily, either in frustration or as a matter of honor. As a result, those who return are likely to be precisely those for whom the appeal to curtail spending has no effect and who will be the most likely to continue adding to the deficit. In Congress, too, conscience is self-eliminating.

The point is, of course, that no matter how perfectly crafted Perot's deficit reduction plan may be, it cannot solve the federal budgetary crisis. As long as it remains in our representatives' rational self-interest to violate its terms, this is precisely what they will do. The only way to avoid the destruction of a commons is to coercively restrict access to it. In the case of federal revenues, the only way to restrict Congressional access is by Constitutional amendment. As the failure of Graham-Rudman-Hollings deficit reduction act and the 1990 budget agreement show, any restraint Congress can impose on itself, Congress can also ignore.

As long as the members of Congress can continue to graze in the pasture of federal revenues, a Constitutional amendment mandating a balanced budget is the least that is required to preserve any of the greenery. Unless this is recognized, it will not matter who wins the Presidential election. The tragedy of the Congress will continue.

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