



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 18, 2011

Sen. DeMint Raps PBS “Muppet Lobby”

In what could become the mother of all Big Bird battles, or Armageddon for the Aardvark, congressional supporters of public television labored into literally the eleventh hour Wednesday night to save the federal subsidy for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. But eliminating that subsidy, which supporters say is vital to maintaining programs of the Public Broadcasting System, remains part of legislation being pushed by House Republicans to cut no less than \$61 billion from the federal budget for the current fiscal year, which began last October 1.



The bill is expected to pass the House, where Republicans are in the majority, before facing stiffer opposition in the Democrat-controlled Senate. But with annual deficits of more than \$1 trillion and austerity on the public agenda, Democrats as well as Republicans may come to view funding of public broadcasting as an unneeded expense. Eliminating the subsidy is among the recommendations of the bipartisan deficit-reduction commission President Obama appointed last year.

But this week, the battle was fought largely along party lines. “This is an ideological attack on public broadcasting,” protested Rep. Edward Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat who showed up at a press conference with a performer costumed as Arthur Aardvark, one of the furry, kid-friendly characters in a children’s program produced by WGBH, the nationally well-known PBS channel in Boston. A stuffed version of Big Bird was also at the lectern, along with a poster depicting PBS characters Bert and Ernie receiving a “GOPinkslip.” Several members of the House of Representatives were present, including one who carried a stuffed version of Elmo, another popular children’s show character on the publicly-funded network. Nita Lowey, a New York Democrat, accused her Republican colleagues of “silencing Cookie Monster.”

But Republicans argued that with the national debt at more than \$14 trillion and rising, subsidizing TV and radio stations is a luxury the nation can no longer afford. “We are borrowing almost 40 cents out of every dollar we spend,” House majority leader Eric Cantor observed. “We’ve got to figure out how to do more with less. It’s unsustainable.”

Markey was one of several Democrats who offered an amendment to protect the funding shortly after 11:30 Wednesday night. The motion was ruled out of order, however, because it would have required changes to the tax code that may not be done by a budget amendment.

Congress approved \$420 million for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting last year, and President Obama is seeking \$451 million in his new budget. The federal subsidies provide an average of 15 percent of the operating budgets for about 1,300 public television and radio stations around the country. Stations in Massachusetts received \$19.7 million in 2010, the [Boston Globe](#) reported, though the amount has varied from year to year. Bay State stations received a high of \$34 million in 2007. Cutting out the federal subsidy would limit the ability of stations to create programs for audiences of all



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ages, said Jeanne Hopkins, vice president at WGBH, which produces some of the better known PBS news, science, and documentary programs, including “Frontline,” “NOVA,” and American Experience.” “If we didn’t have that money, a lot of programs would not get made,” Hopkins told the *Globe*, “because we don’t have the money to start them up.” With many state governments also dealing with large deficits, some stations may be facing a double dose of austerity, as legislatures reconsider their state subsidies. In New Hampshire, for example, the state’s House of Representatives voted this week to ban the use of state money for public television. Should the bill become law, it will mean a loss of \$2.7 million, or 31 percent of the New Hampshire Public Television’s budget, according to president and CEO Peter Frid. The station would have to compensate for that loss through increased fundraising and corporate giving.

“It would be exceedingly difficult, and not for lack of trying,” [Frid](#) told the *New Hampshire Union Leader*. “This is a state of small business, with a lot of dedicated contributors, but that’s a mighty small challenge for anybody in this state.”

Budget cutters have had public broadcasting in their sights for years, and an effort was made to eliminate the federal subsidy after Republicans captured both the U.S. House and Senate in 1994. In addition to federal and state subsidies, public broadcasting stations rely on membership dues, corporate sponsorships, and donations. News of large donations from wealthy contributors, including the \$200 million that McDonald’s heiress Joan Kroc left in her will to National Public Radio, have led to increased calls for eliminating the public funding. Opponents say the stations and their networks should get their funding entirely from the private sector and let the public determine through a free market what programs and stations will survive.

Beyond the dollars and cents, there is a constitutional issue, since no part of the U.S. Constitution authorizes Congress to fund either news or entertainment media. Some critics of both public television and radio have long claimed there is a leftwing bias to the broadcasts a charge made anew last year after National Public Radio commentator Juan Williams was fired for publicly admitting his discomfort at seeing people dressed in Muslim attire on an airplane. Some saw that as an effort to impose an ideologically-charged “political correctness” upon the network and its on-air commentators.

“In a time of real austerity, programs that have strong opponents are in trouble,” observed Rep. Peter King, (R-N.Y.). “If people have been waiting for years to get you, this is the time. ... Don’t underestimate the whole Juan Williams thing.”

But what Rep. Markey has called an “ideological attack” on public broadcasting is but one side of a battle over what the federal government ought to be funding. [Senator Jim DeMint](#) (R-S.C.) took aim Wednesday at what he called the “Muppet lobby” of public television characters advocating increased spending on a variety of federal programs.

“Elmo has been particularly busy,” DeMint wrote in a message posted on his blog. “Elmo has testified before Congress about the need for more funding for the arts and participated in other press conferences to increase spending on public broadcasting. Elmo even went on the lecture circuit last year with Federal Communications Chairman Julius Genachowski to promote government-funded broadband Internet,” DeMint wrote. “At this rate, Americans can expect Big Bird to start filming commercials to hype ObamaCare. If the FCC can borrow Elmo from PBS to build support for their plans, what’s to stop the Department of Health and Human Services from feeding Big Bird some lines? It’s time to draw a clear distinction between the government and entertainment. Democrats shouldn’t cast



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our children's most beloved creatures as characters for their big-government, big-spending causes."

The television industry has changed dramatically since the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was founded in 1967 to provide alternatives to the commercial fare offered on just three major television networks. Today, De Mint said, "Americans have thousands of choices in news, entertainment and educational programming provided by innumerable television, radio and Web outlets. Shows such as (public television's) 'Sesame Street' are multi-million dollar enterprises capable of thriving in the private market."

Between 2003 and 2006, DeMint said, "Sesame Street" generated more than \$211 million in sales of toys and other products related to the popular children's show. Gary Knoll, the president and CEO of Sesame Workshop, received nearly \$1 million in compensation for 2008, the South Carolina Senator said.

"When taxpayer funding for public broadcasting ends, rest assured, Cookie Monster will still be fed," asserted DeMint. "Saving the country from crushing debt and taxes is going to require hard choices. Telling the Muppet lobby 'no' should be one of the easy ones."

Photo: Arthur the Aardvark walks with Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., to a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, Feb. 16, 2011, to discuss the future of Public Broadcasting: AP Images



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