

Pretending We Care About Spending

Written by Alex Baer
Saturday, 14 July 2012 21:19

No one really thought it would work, a reality teevee show about government spending. And it didn't, not at first. Understandably.

It started out as "Let's Pretend We Care About Spending!" It was a once-in-a-while program on cable access teevee -- a standard talking-heads, earnest round-table discussion, sprinkled with flat, mic-in-the-audience-of-five comments.

Intentions were pure, with producers trying to jump-start civic involvement and legitimate political discussion -- replacing apathy and posing -- in the country and its people.

The first program featured sincere discussions trying to parse and discover the relative values of spending on boll weevil research versus ridding the Great Lakes of accidental Asian snail immigrants, transplanted via hulls of ships and boats.

It was dense, real-life stuff affecting all of us, in some way, if minutely. The shows were as lethal as poison gas, as entertainment goes.

Now, almost a year later, after ongoing tinkering and substantial revamping, "The Fantasy Grants Show" is a nightly cable-and-network program that routinely crushes all competition. The hordes of spin-offs took off fast, and, you know as well as I do, there's just no end in sight -- people are crazy about them all, and the audiences keep growing.

In a country of 311 million people, these programs keep pulling 150 or 160 million viewers every night, or more. Not even the Superbowl has gravity enough to pull in numbers like that.

It's ironic that television, long thought the bane of civilization by serious thinkers, despite its initial promise for human education and communication, wound up saving democracy -- doubly so, given the same device was so often used, not that long ago, to spread fear, political lies and propaganda. As it turns out: hope, promise, and help play much better, coast to coast.

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The secret to such wild teevee success, today, turned out to be equal parts greed, glitz, and glamor: live music and guest stars from popular culture, stunning sets and scenery (when the show goes on the road, as it often does), as well as teams of male and female presenters who looked unforgivably great in skimpy sportswear and assorted fashions.

It didn't hurt that they gave away pallets of cold, hard cash on every show, every night, to individuals and communities that had been phone-voted as needy and deserving by that same evening's viewing audience.

The greed came in twice: First, in the stories and presentations of people and towns who thought themselves worthy of a grant or gift -- after their stories were verified by a legion of researchers and detectives.

The greed also entered with politicians (along with the bales of funding for the show's cash giveaways), preening and strutting for the cameras, basking in positive publicity -- the single most addictive substance known to politicians, more toward the heroin end of the spectrum than mere catnip.

The producers of the show had known their well-heeled and well-ego'd subjects very well, placing them in the crosshairs of helplessness:

Given a choice between spending taxpayer money on something truly without value, doing so in the virtual anonymity of legislative chambers, versus, well, being seen on teevee, halting goofy and plain stupid spending, instead using the same amount of funds to really help out American places and people, as guided by the viewer-voters, while being seen as a true patriot by all, well...

It was, as they say, a no-brainer -- even for a politician.

Money poured in from the show's efforts, from commercials, and a percentage of profits were

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contributed to the relief efforts as well. Donations flooded in from everyday people, two and five and twelve dollars at a time, to be distributed to whomever and wherever by viewer-voters, too.

As the rocket of popularity took off, more politicians were snared for the good cause, trying to outdo one another in uncovering dunce-like and worthless spending, and, in so doing, were able to bring welcome five- and six-figure gifts to "The Fantasy Grants Show" that would do widespread -- and vastly publicized -- and true good.

For the first time, politicians were guarding taxpayer funds as if they belonged to the politicians themselves, spending each dollar frugally, but well.

It wasn't long before corporations and the rich wanted in, too, not wanting to see such a mammothly popular boat sail without them, and were soon heard and seen clamoring to get politicians to raise their taxes, so they, too, could be seen and branded as patriotic citizens, doers of civic good.

The number of changes rippled outward, one effect increasing on the next, until we have the amazing country we have today, the one we always knew was just under the surface but always out of reach.

Yes, the amount of change has been amazing -- made all the more so, considering all the good that's been done, at least at first, for all the wrong, self-centered reasons.

But, even now, most people have lost track of what really triggered it all, and really got things sliding into place, and moving apace.

Just last year, in 2012, House Republicans voted thirty-three times to repeal the Affordable Care Act, knowing full well that each vote was meaningless and empty, understanding the Senate would quash any such motion.

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Those 33 votes cost the government, the taxpayers, that is, in the vicinity of 48 million dollars to do. This one set of votes on this one issue, was done over and over again, until they had done so 33 times in all, knowing each act thoroughly futile -- but damned useful in chest-beating and publicity, come election season.

Cost to the taxpayers: only 48 million dollars. Cost to the House Republicans: Nothing.

That's when the producers -- college roommates then, pondering what life was about and what each one wanted to do with it -- heard about this terrible waste, and in a time of tight funding, and starting thinking what else could be done with 48 million dollars.

They had the rough idea sketched out in an hour, had a local, then national show, up and running in some months, always refining, from the shaky, early days of "Let's Pretend We Care About Spending!" to the rock-solid, explosive phenomena we know "The Fantasy Grant Show" is today.

They became the latest 20-something geniuses who have turned billionaires, while changing all of us, the system, and the country, with uncounted secondary effects still rippling and washing outward.

And, for the first time, in a long time, if ever: everyone got to win, and public programs were sorted out, all fair and square, and by the people themselves -- with a little help from their new friends.

... And all because a couple of college kids wondered if such a thing was worth even a try in a bitterly divided, austerity-driven, sourly partisan, and generally ignorant and greedy period in American history.

The kids changed their names for show business wheeling and dealing and effect. The taller one started out life as a Jefferson. If I remember right, the other one was named Adams. Most people don't know that. Me, I always thought that was pretty amazing, too.

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<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/07/12/1109072/-The-Obamacare-repeal-money-pit-50-million-and-counting>