Tee'd Off

By Marni Soupcoff

I CAN PUT UP WITH A LOT. MY LAW DEGREE MAY not have landed me a Porsche in the driveway, but it did lead to a high level of tolerance. That allows me to stomach large amounts of government truth-fudging, rule bending, and exercises in futility.

But there is one thing that still gets me mad: the government using my hard-earned money on condescending, feel-good projects. These forced heart-warmers are not only wasteful and self-serving, they needlessly divert the government's attention from the one or two functions that it really should be performing, like protecting my rights and naming highways after Ludwig von Mises.

Consider, for instance, the White House Tee Ball Commissioner. In case you've missed the last two decades, tee ball is a sport where 3-year-olds whack away at an oversized, stationary softball. Since tee ball doesn't require a pitcher or much hand-eye coordination, it's highly unlikely that it requires a White House Commissioner. But the government has one anyway, simply to generate good feeling. That's a problem.

It's one thing to misspend on ballistic missiles or super jails—such efforts at least have the *potential* to defend people's rights by deterring force. But having a White House Tee Ball Commissioner? There isn't even a pretense of a useful government function there.

I'm not trying to pick on tee ball commissioners. I'm sure they're good guys and, indeed, I have learned from the "Ask the White House" feature on the White House Web site that becoming White House Tee Ball Commissioner is a grueling process. When Tom from Alabama wrote in asking then-commissioner (and former Major League umpire) Steve Palermo how he had landed the job, Palermo explained the selection process. "I received a phone call from the White House asking me if I would consider being the Commissioner of a White House Tee Ball game," he said. Then, he accepted.

But even a feature as apparently benign as "Ask the White House" is itself an example of a cutesy, excruciatingly patronizing government initiative that makes me want to start a revolution.

Here is a typical "Ask the White House" exchange:

Jurgen from Holland writes: I hope that you give my congratulations to President Bush, It is his birthday today. [Apparently no one has explained the concept of the comma splice to Jurgen, but seeing as he is from Holland, I'll refrain from cracks about government spending on U.S. public schools.]
Dr. Cindy Courville [Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director, African Affairs]: Thank you for your congratulations, Jurgen. I will pass your message along to the President.

Yes, my friends, you are funding these riveting exchanges. And they *are* riveting.

Dr. Courville had actually started her "Ask the White House" appearance with the following remarks: "Good morning. I look forward to taking your questions today. In addition, I look forward to traveling to Darfur, Sudan later this afternoon."

Pardon me, but did this woman just say she was *looking forward* to traveling to Darfur? What, before or after she eagerly awaited a root canal and cheerfully anticipated a session of Chinese water torture? Or was her point merely that taking a trip to witness cultural genocide firsthand is a welcome break from answering online questions from Internet White House groupies?

Either way, it's not Dr. Courville's fault. The bottom line is that nothing good or intelligent can ever come of a government project whose only goal is to talk down to potential voters and glorify the government's own existence, whether it takes the form of a White House Tee Ball Commissioner or a virtual White House call-in show. Doing so frivolously wastes our money, certainly. But it also, more dangerously, perpetuates the notion that the government's role is not to protect our freedoms, but to control our emotions—to make us feel warm and fuzzy inside, and ensure we always hold a worshipful view of the cute cast of characters working in the White House.

In some ways, such transgressions may be more insidious than the more obvious instances of unacceptable government spending (think the bevy of Byrd bridges) because no one pays them much mind. To be sure, they're more insulting: it's easy to see how the government might think we'd be dumb enough to buy into, say, corporate welfare, when presented with enough numbers, graphs, and economic gobbledygook in its support. But the fact that they think we can be convinced of the value of a White House Tee Ball Commissioner? Well, that just shows they think we're stupid. Even stupid enough to look forward to a trip to Darfur, I'll bet. R

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