

03-22-1999 We Are Being Fleeced But By Whom?

In the middle of March the TV network owned by General Electric graciously decided to air an "investigative report" on their so-called news show concerning "the fleecing of America." Evidently the folks at NBC got a hold of some very elusive information which indicates that one of the services the government provides to citizens is to rescue them if they get themselves into some sort of trouble on a mountain or in the ocean. These network TV people want us to feel that this is somehow unfair -- that we are being fleeced.

I, for one, am always glad to see anyone taking a real interest in preserving my finances and the fairness of my taxes. And I am sure that the good people at GE don't have any sinister motive in mind, and would never instruct NBC to present shows that argue for decreases in government services provided to ordinary people. Even though business interests have been engaging in an all out offensive to curtail, eliminate, or privatize government services that doesn't mean NBC would gratuitously choose news stories to fit that agenda. And, certainly the people at NBC wouldn't have as their underlying motive a reduction in taxes paid by their corporate owners or its senior executives. That would be inserting a narrow minded political goal into the programming of their network news division -- clearly a violation of all of the fundamentals of journalistic ethics.

Come to think of it, the people who own GE aren't journalists are they?

The people who own GE are capitalists and in capitalist ethics anything goes as long as it makes money. It's probably a coincidence that GE's network happened to choose to investigate an insignificant news story that conveniently attempts to convince people that they are unfairly paying for government services.

Which is not to say that the TV people don't know what they are doing. NBC made a good case for its point; we are getting fleeced in some cases. The real kicker is that when multi-millionaires with nothing better to do with their time get into an expensive balloon and try to float around the world, we, the American people, are paying for the time and materials used to rescue these same useless louts when their balloon crashes. How can that be fair? It isn't. Obviously if people with more money than they know what to do with spend it on outlandish activities for which they are not required to be fully financially responsible then we are being fleeced.

The flaw in the corporate view, as articulated by NBC, is that when ordinary people go hiking or boating rescuing them is on a different scale, and those activities are clearly less risky than round the world ballooning. It is very skillful of them to make their point to an ordinary working class audience with an example of capitalist class abuses. The networks don't often do that, but this abuse of the taxpayer is very minor, and is not at all integral to class relations (as are some other abuses). Instead of directly saying that they don't want to pay for government services, they argue that we taxpayers shouldn't be paying for services that benefit a wealthy and careless few.

In truth, it is a fact of life that people do things that involve risk -- we all get up each day and brave the traffic if nothing else. Some people will have accidents and will need the attention of trained professionals and maybe a lot of volunteers depending on the situation. And we have rules that limit activities that involve certain risks, like who is supposed to operate a motor vehicle, or who is required to wear a life vest in a boat. The role of government in providing rescues is the same for cars as it for activities like skiing, or ocean fishing, or in the recent tragedy of riding a train.

The reason we have a government is to take care of some things that would be impossible or impractical to take care of ourselves individually. It is the responsibility of managers and planners to take this into account. The fact that tax money is used for this purpose, as it is if the fire department has to get someone out of a car that another motorist ran into, is not the fleecing of America -- in spite of what GE may or may not have told NBC to say.

Ironically, the same people who go on and on about not paying for government services - - mostly the Republicans who don't believe in the concept of community -- have already been cutting funding to services like avalanche research centers. The practical upshot of this is that there will be more people caught in avalanches in the future because the people who used to figure out where it is dangerous to ski have been kicked out of their jobs. And these people want to cut funding for rescue services so the people who own GE can get a big tax break, and the unlucky few who get caught in previously avoidable avalanches will just die. Rich people making or saving money as a result of working people dying is also not new.

Lucky for us the people at GE have a network that can bring to light this fleecing of America. Perhaps for a follow up NBC will bring to light just how much GE has been fleecing us through various government subsidies, tax breaks, and inflated billing for defense contracts -- or do you think GE might not allow such an investigation to see daylight?