



Who's Playing Political Games?

by Steven B. Garrison

Currently Iowa lawmakers are considering a proposed cut to the current year's budget. Just as the Legislature has power to appropriate money, it likewise has power to deappropriate, or to take that money away. When things like this happen, it can bring about an interesting, yet predictable, reaction from those threatened with the budget cuts.

Usually, the first reaction is a charge against those who want to cut the budget of playing political games; that they are simply pandering to their set of special interest groups. These charges are then intensified as those targeted for cuts point out who would be hurt most by these reductions. Without fail, the people and services that are held out as the first victims of the axe are always the most vital in the targeted agency. The plan is to turn public sentiment against the budget cuts, killing the idea politically. The proponents of the cuts dare not go against the public sentiment, especially when the people think the cuts are only to placate a special interest group.

This exact scenario is playing out right now in the state of Iowa. The Legislature has put forward a proposed \$35 million budget cut. Their stated reasons are clear. They had budgeted for a \$175 million increase in the state revenues. Thus far only around \$10 million of that has been realized. The state, therefore, needs to cut spending to avoid deficits this year, and budget crunches next year.

However, Governor Vilsack, whose administration would see the majority of the reductions, is fighting both the budget cut, and the reasons behind it. It is in the Governor's tactics that we see this predictable scenario. First he accuses the Republicans in the Legislature of playing political games, claiming they want to cut the budget so they can have a surplus at the end of the year, thereby justifying more tax cuts. More tax cuts are something the Governor has clearly declared he doesn't want. Then he and his administration start making claims of having to lay off thousands of state workers. Naturally, the first workers to be mentioned were the ones that the public would have the strongest reaction to. One of the most significant and often mentioned was the Iowa State Patrol.

The Iowa State Patrol is facing a \$1.2 million budget cut. The Governor is saying this will mean the layoff of nearly a quarter of the troopers, which threatens general law enforcement. But when we look closely at the reductions the Iowa State Patrol would face with the proposed budget cuts, we see a different picture than what is being portrayed by the Governor.

For Fiscal Year 2000 the State Patrol had available to them a total of \$39 million¹. When it came time for departments to make their budget requests to the Governor for the next fiscal year, the Department of Public Safety requested \$42 million¹ for the State Patrol. But Governor Vilsack requested far less, asking for only \$38.8 million¹, actually cutting the Patrol's budget from the previous year. The Legislature did not allow this, budgeting \$39.5 million².

On January 12, 2000, before the start of FY 2001, the Legislature introduced an \$18 million deappropriations bill for the rest of FY 2000³. This included a \$.8 million² cut to the State Patrol's budget for that year. Only one person in the House of Representatives and two people in the Senate voted against this bill. The Governor signed the bill into law on January 18, 2000, only six days after its introduction⁴.

Even though this act reduced what the Patrol had available to them, the State Patrol was actually unable to spend all of their budgeted funds, leaving a surplus of a little more than \$100,000². This did not, however, change their budget for FY 2001: it remained at \$39.5 million. This gave the Patrol \$1.4 million more than it could spend the previous year.

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600 North Jackson Street

Mt. Pleasant, Iowa 52641-1328

Phone: 319-385-3462 Fax: 319-385-3799

E-Mail: public.interest.institute@limitedgovernment.org Web Site: www.limitedgovernment.org

We are now towards the end of FY 2001, and once again the Legislators are looking at passing a deappropriations bill. This year's proposed budget cut is nearly \$35 million. This amount includes a \$1.2 million cut to the Iowa State Patrol. This would still leave the State Patrol with more than it was able to use the previous year.

However, instead of the wide bi-partisan support this act received last year, this year's deappropriations bill has come under bitter Democrat attack. Naturally, it is noticeable that this year's deappropriations bill is larger than last year's. However, the broad consensus among the Governor and his fellow opponents is that there should be no spending cuts at all. Additionally, the Governor and his fellow opponents are specifically pointing out the cuts to the Iowa State Patrol.

Yet there was absolutely none of this kind of angst last year when the same type of measure came up and the State Patrol's budget was cut. It is true that this year's bill is twice as large, but it would seem that this year's anger against it is disproportionately large. Last year these same people had no trouble at all cutting the State Patrol's budget. In fact the Governor had a cut to the Patrol's budget already figured into his budget proposal. Yet now, when the idea of cutting the Patrol's budget is raised, the Governor's office and his deputies launch into a synchronized attack. They try to scare the citizens of Iowa, and the Troopers themselves, by saying that this cut will mean the firing of up to 100 of the current 455 State Troopers.

This is absolute nonsense. The State Patrol was able to employ these same Troopers in the last fiscal year with even less money than they will have even after this \$1.2 million cut. Additionally, when the Governor bemoans the idea of cutting the State Patrol's budget he seems to forget how he wanted to cut their budget himself just a few months ago. And none of them seem to be able to remember that in the last fiscal year, the State Patrol did not even use all of the money they were given.

The State Patrol was able to sustain itself last year and had money left over. Why then will it need to fire almost a quarter of its troopers this year when it will end up with even more money than it used last year?

The answer is simple: it will not be forced to fire anyone. Those who are at the head of the Department of Public Safety, and the Governor himself, are simply playing politics in the worst way. They are playing on people's fear, and using it as a tool to obtain a political end. The Democrat Governor doesn't want the Republicans getting popular support for any more tax cuts. If the Republican-controlled Legislature is able to keep the budget in surplus, especially in the face of lagging state tax revenues, then there is little room left for an argument against further tax reductions.

Therefore, the Governor's office and his appointees are out trying to whip the people of Iowa into a scared frenzy, trying to convince them that this deappropriations act is some kind of outlandish political event that never happens, and that the Republicans are just playing politics. When the truth is shown, the noise of political gaming emanates from the Governor's Mansion.

ENDNOTES:

¹State of Iowa Budget Report 1999-01, C-19 FY 2001 "Annual Department Request and Governor's Recommendation."

²FY 2001 General Fund Appropriations

³House File 2039

⁴House File 2039 Bill History

Steven B. Garrison is a Research Analyst with Public Interest Institute.

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