

OVERDRAFT



The Charlotte Observer

Debt documentary airs on WTVI

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By Mark Washburn

“Overdraft” is a horror movie for smart people.

Debuting at 8 p.m. Monday on WTVI (Channel 42) and airing nationally this summer on PBS, the documentary explains the causes of the national debt, why it’s a threat to the economy and national security and possible solutions to the nation’s debt, now well over \$15 trillion.

Don’t know what a trillion is? You’re not alone.

“Overdraft” explains it this way: A million seconds is 11 1/2 days. A trillion seconds is 32,000 years.

To pay it off today, every American – including infants – would have to pony up more than \$50,000 each.

“Blessed are the young,” is the quote cited from Herbert Hoover, “because they will inherit the national debt.”

Produced by Davidson-based documentarian Scott Galloway with an urgent score by Charlotte composer Fred Story, “Overdraft” draws on a variety of experts – from Time magazine’s Joe Klein to former president Bill Clinton – to explain the issue in historic and understandable terms.

Erskine Bowles, the former chairman of the UNC System who served as co-chairman of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform with Alan K. Simpson, puts it most simply: “This fiscal path we’re on is simply not sustainable.”

But the recommendations from the commission didn’t find backing in Washington. People want the budget cut, Bowles acknowledges. They just don’t want cuts where most of the money goes, to defense, health care and Social Security.

Unless something is done, though, the problem is going to get worse. Already the baby-boom generation is hitting retirement age, expecting their benefits and getting in line for Medicare.

When Social Security was set up, the average life expectancy in the United States was 64 and retirement was at 65, Klein points out. Now boomers can expect to live at least a decade longer with mounting health costs toward the end.

Because the federal government can always print more money, it gives the illusion that things are stable. But the individual states, without that ability, are already showing symptoms of bankruptcy.

Illinois is one of the most stricken. A pharmacist there illustrates the point. He had to pay his suppliers every two weeks for medication disbursed to Medicaid patients. But the state of Illinois was running nine months late with its reimbursements to him for their bills because the state didn’t have the money. One day, neither did he. He lost his pharmacy business of 20 years.

Another voice from the past by the end of “Overdraft” leaves us with a flicker of hope that the appropriate sacrifices will eventually be made. “You can always count on Americans to do the right thing,” said Winston Churchill, “after they’ve tried everything else.”

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