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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Cynicism about government like acid

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NORTH OAKS — The television series "The National Parks: America's Best Idea," directed by Ken Burns, was recently on public television. It is valuable to consider the larger meaning of our national parks and what our national parks reflect about the American character and the role of government in our civil society.

As Americans, we are proud of our rugged individualism and sense of shared community values. "Don't Tread on Me" is part of the character of America as is "E pluribus unum" — "Out of many, one." The tension between those values was present at the birth of our country and extends to present-day debates.

The United States is a country of limited government. A healthy skepticism about government is necessary. Nonetheless, government is an essential part of the civic fabric of our country. Calibrating the proper balance between individualism and social responsibility is not an easy one. Good government is more art than science. Understood as such, our national park system is a masterpiece of civic engagement.

Our national parks provide a public good that could never be delivered in the private marketplace as effectively or as broadly. To be sure, Walt Disney (parks), other theme parks, and water parks provide recreation. To be sure, private nonprofit organizations also conserve natural resource and provide nature education. However, the Walt Disneys of the world function differently and are not available to everyone. Our national parks are egalitarian — they are available to the rich, the poor, and the middle class.

Our national parks are the very embodiment of the motto, "Out of many, one."

In recent decades, there has been an erosion of confidence in the ability of government to serve the public. "Government is not the solution to our problem. It is the problem," is a statement uttered by Ronald Reagan and echoed by many conservatives. The anti-war protestors of the left of the 1960s and 1970s also attacked the ability of government to serve the public. The end result of that decades-long assault is a deep cynicism about government that goes beyond a reasonable skepticism that keeps government from overstepping its proper bounds. It is an acid that erodes the foundation of good and effective government.

Our national park system is a bold and grand American experiment that has worked and been adopted around the world. Our national parks project is forward-thinking vision and confidence in government. The values embodied in our national parks — civic purpose and public good — are timeless and provide important lessons for today. We should reflect on those values and consider where future "America's best ideas" may come from.