

Paul Begala: The Right Hates Spending, Unless It Pockets the Cash

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Right-wingers hate spending—unless they pocket the cash.

I don't know if it's a conservative thing or a wealth thing or just a jerk thing, but I've been appalled lately at the complete lack of self-awareness of rich right-wingers. The hypocrisy of Republican millionaires who say they want to cut government spending while simultaneously asking for a government handout is staggering. How can they be that clueless? Are they missing the gene for embarrassment? Or does having your ring kissed dull the shame receptors of the soul?

Take Joe Ricketts. The billionaire businessman recently landed on the front page of *The New York Times* for considering a proposal to fund \$10 million in ads attacking President Obama's former minister, Jeremiah Wright. But let's set aside the content of the ads. Focus, instead, on the stated purpose of Ricketts's super PAC, which is nicely captured in its name: Ending Spending. That's right: it doesn't aim to trim or reduce government spending but to end it. How? In part by outing hypocrites who "say one thing and do another" on the subject.

So imagine my surprise when I heard about how Ricketts and his family have used the beloved Chicago Cubs as a hostage to persuade (a less charitable person would say "extort") taxpayers to give them welfare. The Cubbies last won a World Series 103 years ago, but during the Ricketts reign they have gone from lovable losers to cynical hypocrites. After hints that the family might move the Cubs' spring-training home from Arizona to Florida, the panicky people of Mesa handed the owners \$99 million of their money.

Now Mr. Ending Spending and his son Tom Ricketts are trying the same trick on the people of Chicago, seeking \$150 million of taxpayers' money to renovate Wrigley Field, plus a share of amusement-tax revenue until the end of time—which, by the way, is coming sooner than a Cubs World Series victory. As the indispensable ThinkProgress blog noted, Joe Ricketts has smugly declared, "I think it's a crime for our elected officials to borrow money today, to spend money today, and push the repayment of that loan out into the future on people who are not even born yet." And yet that's precisely what he is trying to do in Chicago. In Texas we call that chutzpah.

Ricketts, oddly, is not the only right-wing hypocrite in baseball. Former pitcher Curt Schilling should be inducted into the hall of shame as well. The state of Rhode Island has pumped \$75 million of taxpayers' money into Schilling's unsuccessful 38 Studios, and could flush millions more down Schilling's commode. Schilling, who earned \$114 million in his baseball career, loves to lecture us bleacher bums about government spending. He campaigned for Republicans George W. Bush, John McCain, and Scott Brown because, as he said of Brown, "he's for smaller government." Too small to help the poor, but big enough to bail out a multimillionaire.

Ricketts and Schilling will find a kindred spirit in Mitt Romney. Romney's wealth is unspeakably vast and his personal consumption grotesquely conspicuous, but that's his business. What rankles me—and should hurt Romney politically—is that some of that staggering wealth came from taxpayers, through bailouts and subsidies. In 1993 Bain & Co. owed the Bank of New England \$38 million. The bank went under, and Romney negotiated a deal with the FDIC that allowed Bain to walk away from \$10 million of that debt—sticking the taxpayers with the bill.

When Bain owned Steel Dynamics, Romney and his investors took \$37 million in taxpayer subsidies—a sweet deal when they only invested about half that amount themselves. Tad DeHaven of the libertarian Cato Institute told the *Los Angeles Times*, “This is corporate welfare, an example of the government stepping into the marketplace, picking winners and losers, providing profits to business owners, and leaving taxpayers stuck with the bill.”

Classic crony capitalism: privatize the gain, socialize the risk. When Romney drove GST Steel into bankruptcy, he and his partners made \$12 million in profit and another \$4.5 million in consulting fees. But Romney stuck the taxpayers with a \$44 million tab for the company's underfunded pensions.

But Romney—like Ricketts and Schilling and so many others—never tires of lecturing the rest of us for being so selfish as to want good teachers, safe streets, and fully-funded fire departments. “Getting our fiscal house in order has become more than just an economic issue,” Romney's campaign website piously declares. “It's a moral imperative.”

A moral imperative? Spare me. Most middle-class Americans are tired of sanctimonious right-wingers who preach fiscal chastity after spending the night in the brothel of government bailouts.

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