

The Washington Times

Washington Post buyer Jeff Bezos offers 'libertarian' perspective

Has backed causes on both sides of the aisle

By: Jennifer Harper- August 6, 2013

Jeff Bezos, the Internet mogul buying The Washington Post, is no stranger to politics. It's just that his politics don't fit the normal labels of Washington.

In his home of Washington state, the Amazon CEO joined liberals in spending \$2.5 million to defeat a ban on gay marriage, but he's also have donated \$100,000 to conservatives' efforts to defeat a tax on millionaires.

He has partnered with Hillary Rodham Clinton at the State Department to help expand digital literacy around the globe, while putting some of his own money to help Republican Meg Whitman in her failed run for California governor.

One of his biggest targets of political donations — Amazon's own political action committee — distributes money to both parties, with a slight advantage to Democrats, 52 to 48 percent. His personal donations also favor Democrats — \$28,000 to \$5,000 for Republicans since 1998.

His overall political record leaves the soon-to-be -publisher of one of America's most influential newspapers a bit of an enigma — a liberal-leaning libertarian with a touch of free market philosophy.

Mr. Bezos is "a little of everything, with an emphasis — at least on the federal level — on 'little,'" said Russ Choma, an analyst at OpenSecrets, a research arm of the Center for Responsive Politics.

Slate magazine has called him an "inscrutable libertarian Democrat" while the Atlantic deems him a "libertarian," a term coined in 2006 by the Cato Institute for those seeking social freedoms, retooled economic policies and tax reform.

What is less murky is that Mr. Bezos has lots of business pending with the very government his newspaper in Washington will be covering. From antitrust issues with its e-readers to the Internet sales tax it has embraced, Amazon is deeply entwined in the business of Congress, the courts and the executive branch. The evidence can be found in its lobbying expenditures alone.

Over the past two years, Amazon's lobbying shop spent \$4.2 million pushing the Internet sales tax on Capitol Hill, as well as calling for immigration reform, beefing up cybersecurity and to reinvent the U.S. Postal Service.

Mr. Bezos was a ballyhooed participant at the secretive Bilderberg conference in June. Observers were baffled as to why he was in attendance, until they noticed that Google CEO Eric Schmidt was also on the membership roster. Their expertise was apparently of interest to the Bilderberg organizers. The normally clandestine, elite group released a public agenda that included such items as "how big data is changing almost everything" and "online education."

Mr. Bezos' inclination to transform the global media sphere is already established, though. In 2012, he revealed a partnership with Mrs. Clinton. The pair announced he would help the State Department "create a global e-reader program that introduces aspects of U.S. society and culture directly to young people, students, and international audiences in new ways," according to the federal agency.

On these shores, visitor records also reveal that Mr. Bezos visited the White House eight times during a two-year period ending in December 2012, mostly on "member tours" or group gatherings, though one visit is described as a "business outreach meeting."

Mr. Bezos has quirky interests outside of The Post. He has already donated \$42 million to a "10,000 Year Clock," a monumental timepiece hidden on the West Texas prairie. He also funded the recent recovery of sunken Apollo space rockets from the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and created the \$15 million Bezos Center for Neural Circuit Dynamics at Princeton University, his alma mater.

But the billion-dollar question: Does Mr. Bezos have a hands-on business plan in place for his news organization? Well, no. He has more of a reinvented business attitude in mind for The Post, advising employees in a letter that there "is no map" and that all hands would need to invent and experiment, while heeding the needs of readers.

Earl J. Wilkinson, CEO of the International News Media Association, sees the pairing of Mr. Bezos and The Post as a "microcosm of the entire news industry" at this time.

"To be clear, Bezos isn't a lonely white knight riding proudly to the rescue. The Grahams actively shopped The Washington Post to at least six suitors before deciding that Bezos was the best fit for the conundrum so many legacy publishers are facing themselves: How to create scale to invest in innovation when revenues are declining or flat?" Mr. Wilkinson asked.

"We must change our industry culture to become companies that can generate innovations, ramp them up, monetize them, be willing to shut them down when the life cycle is complete, and continuously repeat that process."

Other observers had mixed reactions.

“The Washington Post, under Bezos’ ownership, obviously isn’t going to be able to restore or re-create anything remotely resembling an old-school newspaper-style monopoly,” said Advertising Age columnist Simon Dumenco in his analysis noting Amazon’s history of crushing competitors.

“I think it won’t be long before we see Bezos’ Post doing things that are just wonderful for the Post, but terrible for journalism as a business,” he wrote.

Washington Post Co. stock hit a five-year high Tuesday, closing up 4.3 percent to \$593.