

LIBERALS TO MY RESCUE

United Media Syndicated Column

March 1, 2001

Know ye your adversaries, and ye shall know thee thine own cause -- Ben 8:26.

The stakes of the Bush tax cut plan were made clear a few days before his speech to Congress -- by his opponents. Consider remarks by liberal luminaries Ralph Neas, Fred Wertheimer and Charles Loveless, all quoted recently in a stellar piece of Washington reporting by Alison Mitchell of the New York Times. I knew I was for the Bush tax cut. Now I know why.

Thanks, guys.

Mitchell's piece was entitled "Interest Groups Are Gearing Up for High-Stakes Tax Cut Fight." Indeed they are. And it is clear that this is going to be politics of a broader band than we are accustomed to, which will help clarify things, which is good. Without such clarification, the tax debate gets be-fogged by claims about lock boxes, the reliability of 10-year forecasts, goody-two-shoes bidding wars about who is more "fiscally responsible," what constitutes "fiscal sanity," voter approval of tax cuts, whether the current economic turbulence is best described graphically as a "V," a "U" or an "L," and -- with somewhat greater merit -- an argument about whether the proposed cut is "fair."

The Republicans have their first team ready: wouldn't you know it? -- "primarily business and trade groups," organized into the "Tax Relief Coalition." TRC members include the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Food Marketing Institute and the National Federation of Independent Business. And why not? After all, says Dan Danner, the TRC's senior vice president, "The vast majority of our members file taxes as individuals, so when there's a tax rate cut,

that's money in their pocket." That is not inaccurate, only bloodless and short-sighted, a familiar Republican posture. It's not just about money; it's also about liberty.

But the liberals are not bloodless, and they have gone wall to wall, far beyond economic interest groups. Right up in front of their parade, for example, is Ralph Neas, the president of People for the American Way -- an organization that was set up to deal with issues of "values" such as censorship and church-state separation. Alongside him is Fred Wertheimer, former head of Common Cause and now president of "Democracy 21," an association previously concerned with campaign finance reform. Says Wertheimer of the potential tax cut, "This is an issue that goes to the core of how this country is going to govern itself for the next decade or more." He is exactly right, and the Republicans haven't fully mustered their arguments along that line of battle.

Among the other "150 liberal organizations" in the anti-tax cut camp are the Sierra Club, the NAACP, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, assorted women's groups and, of course, Big Daddy: the unions.

Here is how Charles Loveless, director of legislation for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, described the threat of the Bush tax cut to his liberal colleagues: "If a tax cut of this magnitude is enacted, it is essentially going to starve all of the programs that the organizations in this room care about."

Unmasked! Twice. Of course, the liberal programs are not going to "starve"; the Bush spending plan increases discretionary budget spending by 4 percent per year. But, trust me, "starvation" is only a mild opening epithet in what will be an escalating war of

words. This tax cut plan will be borked. Soon, we will hear about plush plutocrats in their personal jets lighting up their cigars with the crinkled mortgages of the middle class.

But Loveless' remark reveals something more than rhetorical intensity. The liberals want the money kept in Washington because they want to spend it. Spend it how? From the top down, on programs environmentalists, feminists, trial lawyers and labor leaders "care about." What the Democrats and liberals want is elemental: taxes from Republicans to pay for the full monty of Democratic programs. Nor do I blame them; that is what liberals should want and always want.

Both sides will claim "fairness." The Democrats say the rich get too much of an absolute dollar cut. The Republicans say the proportions are tilted toward those most in need through a child care credit and sharper rate cuts down the income scale. This can be negotiated.

But at its root the argument is about whether American society will move forward on a top-down or a bottom-up path. Will ever-bigger bucks come to Washington for centralized disposition? Or will ever-more bucks be left with the taxpayers for their own purposes? That argument is at the heart of modern political discourse around the world, and at its heart is the extension of liberty.

For me, I want to leave the bucks at home, and I'd like to thank my liberal friends for helping me understand why.

Ben Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and is the moderator of PBS's "Think Tank."

© 2000, *Newspaper Enterprise Assn.*