

ANOTHER MYSTERIOUS CHARITY PUZZLE by Si Frumkin

About two years ago I wrote “The Charity Puzzle”, an article on the way Americans donate. I had just finished a fascinating book, “Who Really Cares?” by professor Arthur Brooks, that analyzed American charity donors by different religions, political views, age and income. It showed that liberals gave much less than conservatives, that the religious were much more generous than the secular, that the elderly gave more than the young and that the rich gave a smaller percentage of their income than those who earned less than \$50,000 a year. (If you are interested in knowing more – write me and I will send you a copy of the article).

Intrigued, I went international, dug through the Internet and learned that Americans give incomparably more than other nations. We give 1.7% of our GDP, more than twice that of the 2nd place U.K. with 0.73%, followed by other English-speaking countries with 0.7%, several Europeans with 0.5% and, in last place, France with just 1/10 of 1%.

There were no really impressive reasons for the differences. I ended my article by remarking, snidely, that it looked as if the stingiest person in the world had to be a rich liberal French atheist under 35.

I didn't think very much about this subject in the subsequent two years. I kept on writing my own charity checks, bugged others to support and contribute to worthy causes and felt good about knowing that so many of my fellow Americans were doing the same.

Then, as the current political campaign wound down to a finish and the candidates tried hard to impress the voters, I came across information that sheds a light on the peculiar character of one of the major figures on the political battlefield. This information is easily available, it has been published here and there with little comment, but as far as I know, the candidate in question, prospective vice-president of the United States, Senator Joe Biden, has never

been asked a direct question about being so extremely tightfisted in giving to charity. There may well be a good explanation. I would very much like to know what it is.

Here are the facts: the Joe and Jill Biden tax returns for the years 1998 - 2007 show a total income of \$2,450,042 and a total of charity contributions of \$3,690 – about one eighth of 1%.

The Bidens' worst year was 1999 – adjusted income of \$210,797 and a contribution of \$120 - less than one sixteenth of 1%.

Their best year was 2007 with an income of \$319, 853 and donations of \$995 – slightly more than a quarter of 1%.

Syracuse University's professor Arthur Brooks, the author of the book I mentioned in the beginning, says that the average American household gives about two percent of adjusted gross income a year. For the Biden household this would have meant a contribution of \$49,000 for the 10 years. They gave \$3,690 – one fifteenth of what an average American family gives!

By comparison, Al Gore, the 1992 Democratic candidate for vice president, donated \$1,727 out of an income of \$183,558 – about 1%. This too was about half of what an average American gives but compared to Biden, Al Gore was generous – he gave more in one year than Biden did in five years! I should add that Gore was much less generous when he wasn't running for office – in 1997 he gave \$353 from an income of almost \$200,000 – just 1/17th of 1%!

Are all politicians this stingy? Well, some aren't. Tod and Sarah Palin released their tax returns for 2006 - \$166,080 and 2007 - \$127,869 or a total income of \$293,949 for the two years with charity contributions of \$8105. This works out to about 2.75% and compares to Biden's donation for the same amount earnings of just \$570! There is also Dick Cheney, the current vice-president whose 10-year tax return showed an average yearly donation of "just" 2.14%. At the time he was roundly castigated by the New York Times and other

mainstream media for being “meager” and, in the words of recent Weekly Standard editorial, “raked over the coals for his low level of charitable giving.”

The coals must have cooled off since then. The current contestant for Democratic vice president does not outrage the New York Times for giving only about 1/15 of the percentages given by the Palins and the Cheneys.

To be fair, the Democratic presidential candidate has far outclassed his appointed vice-president. Barack Obama’s charitable contributions for 2006-2007 show a 5.8%-6.1% donation to charity. But to be even fairer, McCain has given 27.3-28.6% during the same time – almost 6 times as much as Obama.

Isn’t it puzzling that while the widely trumpeted compassion of one political party is largely concentrated on giving away someone else’s money - yours and mine, fellow taxpayers - their cheapskate leaders, with little notice and practically no comment from the major print and TV media that usually glory in scandalous information – or even their political opponents - get away with disgusting miserliness and disregard for personal charity when it affects their own checkbooks?