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One-Sided Questioning: Russert Pushed Both Friends and Foes of Bush Tax Cut to Suspend Its Benefits

## A Bias Blind Spot for *Meet the Press* Host

Compared with ABC's Sam, Cokie and George, and CBS's Bob and Gloria, NBC's Tim Russert is a balanced interviewer who usually makes both liberals and conservatives squirm. "Some people love to offer their opinions and let it out, and my job is different. ...As Lawrence Spivak, who founded *Meet the Press* said, 'Sit back, learn as much as you can about your guests and his or her positions on the issues, and then take the other side,'" Russert explained to Don Imus on July 15. "I hope I've been true to that mission."

That's the right approach, and during the ten years he's hosted *Meet the Press*, Russert has almost always followed his own guidelines. But when it comes to last year's tax cuts, Russert has abandoned his objectivity in a crusade to dilute the tax cut's benefits. While making tax cutters defend their views, Russert doesn't hit tax cut opponents with conservative arguments. Instead, he invites them to criticize the tax cut as he lobbies for its early demise. That's hardly "taking the other side." A run-down of his 2002 questions:

■ **Bush Cabinet Secretaries Paul O'Neill** (Jan. 6, July 28) and **Don Evans** (Jan. 13), White House Chief **Andrew Card** (Jan. 27), OMB Director **Mitch Daniels** (June 9), and Speaker **Dennis Hastert** (June 23) were all challenged from the left by Russert. "Every study by the Congressional Budget Office, by independent analysts, has said that about 60 percent of that [federal budget] surplus over the next ten years has vanished, attributable to the tax cut," Russert lectured Card back in January. Each question to the tax cutters presented anti-tax cut arguments.

■ **John McCain and Joe Lieberman**. Appearing jointly on *Meet the Press* on January 6, the pair were only asked about delaying or repealing the measure they both voted against: "Why not delay the tax cut until we know if we have the resources necessary to deal with Social Security, health care, aid to Afghanistan and the war on terrorism?"

■ **Dick Gephardt**. On January 27, Russert painted the Bush tax cut as an impediment to big spending ideas. He

asked the House Democratic leader: "As a Democrat, do you believe over the next ten years we can provide the money, find the money for education, Social Security, Medicare, defense, education, energy, and still have in place the Bush tax cut?" He never asked Gephardt to contemplate curtailing the spending.

■ **Tom Daschle**. By May 26, Lieberman was for repealing provisions that benefitted upper-income taxpayers. Russert lobbied Daschle: "Every-one would get a tax cut, no one would pay higher taxes, but in future years, it would be stopped. Do you agree with Senator Lieberman?" When Daschle demurred, Russert pleaded, "How about the top bracket? Postpone the tax cut for the very top one percent?"

■ **Kent Conrad**. On June 9, Russert asked the Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee to do more than just criticize: "If the

President's tax cut, in your estimation, is driving these deficits, why not step forward and say, 'We should stop the tax cut, roll it back?'"

■ **John Kerry**. On June 23, Russert implored Kerry to add his support to Ted Kennedy's proposal to reduce the tax cut: "Why won't John Kerry step out with his Democratic colleagues and say, 'Yes, I believe it's worth fighting for. We should stop or cancel the Bush tax cut?'"

■ **Only two contrarian questions**. On Feb. 17, he asked James Carville about Daschle's claim that the tax cut caused the recession. "The recession began in March. The tax cut was passed in July. How is that possible?" And on July 21, he told Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, a repeal supporter, "you will be criticized, in effect, for raising taxes in the middle of a recession." But Russert pressed tax cut opponents about repeal 30 times this year. That's not challenging liberals. That's playing into their hands. — *Rich Noyes*

### Next Time, Confront Liberals With This:

"In each of the three cases of income tax rate reductions in the 20th century, we saw three effects: 1) Total tax revenues rose; 2) Tax payments, and the tax share paid by the wealthy increased; and 3) The rate of economic growth increased." — *Economist Arthur Laffer in Dollars & Nonsense: Correcting the News Media's Top Economic Myths, published by the MRC's Free Market Project.*

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