

“Tax-and-Spend”

My detractors – yes, I know, you’re shocked, shocked that such people might exist – like to label me a “tax-and-spend liberal”. Of course by labeling me a sinner, they thereby prove their saintliness. But the truth is, unlike these ideologues, I’ve actually led a fight against government waste and corruption.

It began in the mid-1990s, when I was a candidate for the Oshkosh Common Council. A group of neighbors along Jackson Street, concerned about the State’s proposal to spend over \$2 million widen their street, asked me to meet with them.

The State’s published standards for widening a street to 4 lanes required either of two things to be true. Either the current traffic volume had to be above a certain level, I believe 16,000 vehicles per day, or there had to be significant growth in traffic volume, so the required volume would soon be reached.

Jackson street’s volume was below the required level. But the State DOT claimed that its statistical analysis proved that traffic growth justified widening the street. The trouble was, the residents didn’t believe the analysis. They lived there, and they hadn’t seen any traffic volume growth.

If you have no statistical training, a statistics printout is just gibberish. But I teach statistics and econometrics, so when they showed me a copy of the DOT’s printout, I could tell within a minute that (a) the DOT had run 6 different regressions on the traffic data, and (b) that none of them, not a single one, showed any statistically significant traffic volume growth.

So the \$2 million spending project was based on a bald faced lie. Now, you would have thought that all these self-proclaimed “conservatives” would have risen up as one, and demanded that this wasteful, fraudulent spending project be stopped. But you would have been wrong. The business community, those pillars of conservatism, said nothing. The Chamber of Commerce, silent, at least in public; behind the scenes, they were almost certainly pushing for this project.

Our local representatives to state government, Gregg Underheim and Carol Roessler, Republicans both, not a peep – although Gregg at least pretended to quietly see what he could do, and then shrugged off his helplessness. And of course the Governor, one Tommy Thompson – well, it was his DOT that had done the lying, and even continued to lie about it, well after the original lie had been exposed.

Interestingly, the opposition to the project came almost exclusively from people that the ideologues would also label as “tax-and-spend liberals”. But that’s what ideologues do. They create labels to castigate their opponents, even when their implied claim – that they are the fiscally prudent ones – is itself another bald faced lie.

Question – under which two Presidents, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, or Bush, were Federal outlays consistently around 22% of GDP? Under which President did spending consistently fall, to below 18.5% of GDP? Under which did it rise to about 21% of GDP? The answer is in table B-79 of Bush’s 2008 Economic Report of the President.

An interesting addendum to the story. Shortly after I left the City Council, Paul Esslinger proposed that my street, Wisconsin, also be widened. He claimed (in a Traffic Advisory Board meeting) it was so narrow, he had difficulty driving down it. But I knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to show me, the ex-council member, who was now the big dog. And he was clearly willing to spend taxpayers dollars to do that.

Well, Paul, someday you’ll just have to learn the difference between what you want, and what you actually need.