

# OUR (WE) WORKING CLASS PUNDITS

Digby has a righteous rant about a discussion between Wolf Blitzer, Mary Matalin, and Paul Begala in which they revealed their utter divorce from the reality lived by most Americans as they discuss whether the \$172,000 Robert Gibbs made as Press Secretary was a sacrifice. Here's a taste:

According to these guys [Robert Gibbs'] job is right up there with curing cancer for sheer importance to the future of mankind.

Look, you can't blame these two. They are both glugging from the same taxpayer trough half the time and have a big investment in believing that what they do is so special and so unique that they are just a little bit better than lesser people who toil at less exalted labor.

And evidently, they truly believe regular people don't eat lunch at their desks and work long hours and have huge responsibilities. Or if they do, they are in very important jobs like media and investment banking where people are paid what they are "worth."

You ought to read the whole thing.

I just wanted to add two things.

First, in the discussion, Matalin argues that, when you work at the White House "you really do work three shifts a day. You work 24 hours a day." In response to which Begala elaborates,

The President's trying to make a point here – he's not trying to say that 172 thousand dollars a year is not a good paycheck. But compared to what the guy could be making... And, as Mary points out, **if it's a hourly wage, then Gibbs**

**is probably making about fifty cents an hour.** [my emphasis]

If Gibbs' \$172,000 annual salary were broken down into hourly salary, Begala says, with the assumption that he was working 24 hours a day 365 days a year, then his hourly wage "is probably ... about fifty cents an hour."

Ahem.

There are 8,760 hours in a 24/7 year. Gibbs' \$172,000 salary for those 8,760 hours would work out to be \$19.63 an hour. For someone working 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year, that works out to be a yearly salary of \$39,260. Which for household salaries—not individuals—falls in the middle quintile of yearly income in this country, and less than \$3,000 less than what Wolf says is the "mean" salary in this country (he actually means "median" and he may be using just full time workers).

Gibbs needs a break, Obama says, and Begala and Matalin agree, because even assuming he's been working 24/7, he's been working as hard for the same money as half the country. So we should feel sorry for him.

But here's my second point: We online pundits are often no better at this.

Consider this question Kevin Drum asked the other day:

Suppose that you lead **a comfortable middle-class life**. Let's say that you're in your 30s, married, two children, and **you make \$100,000 per year**. I offer you a fair coin flip with the following possible outcomes:

▪ ***Heads:*** *You will be stripped of most of your assets and will earn \$30,000 per year for the rest of your*

*life. That's all you get, and neither friends nor family can top it up for you.*

- ***Tails:*** *You will earn \$1 million per year for the rest of your life.*

Treat this as a serious question. Would you take me up on my offer to flip the coin? [my emphasis]

See the problem?

A household making \$100,000 a year is not "living a comfortable middle-class life." In fact, that family would fall in the highest quintile of household income in this country. His question should read, "suppose you live an upper class life, would you flip a coin to risk becoming solidly middle class for the possibility of becoming even richer?"

At first, I just attributed this to Drum living in CA, where \$100,000 is still affluent but doesn't go as far as it does here in flyover country. But it got worse, IMO, when he went on to explain why he was doing this.

I'm writing a piece about income inequality and other things for the next issue of the magazine, and in an email conversation with my editor she suggested that one point worth making is that in America today, "someone making \$100K has a lot more in common with someone making \$30K than someone making \$100 million." Now, there's an obvious sense in which that's true, but I suspect that there's a more important sense in which it's not. Yes, the zillionaire jets around the world and owns a bunch of mansions and has a staff of aides and servants to take care of things. That's really, really nice. But

our \$100K wage slave also has a comfortable house, gets to fly around the world now and again, probably employs a gardener and cleaning service, has a pretty stable life, etc. etc. Also nice. On the other hand, a household earning \$30,000 – which is well above the poverty line – lives a pretty precarious life on a variety of measures. So how to get at the difference? Well, I figured one possible way is this: if you *really were* a fairly ordinary upper middle class wage earner making \$100K per year, and you had a 50-50 chance of either joining the ranks of the elite or falling down to the bottom of the working class, which seems further away to you? The answer from comments was loud and clear: the bottom of the working class. I didn't count, but I'd say only about 10% of commenters were willing to take the coin flip. The other 90% would stick with their \$100K lifestyle.

So what does this mean? Probably not much. But it's suggestive that in terms of lifestyle, if not political goals, a \$100K wage earner actually *feels* somewhat closer to the zillionaires than to someone barely scraping by. We intuit, correctly I think, that life at the bottom of the working class is pretty damn tough, while life at the tippy top is more exciting, but perhaps not fundamentally different from life in the upper middle class.

So Drum's editor (who, working at a lefty magazine, might not make \$100,000 herself, but certainly is a member of a kind of elite), tells him he should write about how upper class families have so much in common with the families struggling to stay in the quickly vanishing middle class. To test the theory before he writes about it, he asks his readers

what they would choose if they were upper class (though he doesn't call it that)—to stay there, or risk joining the “the bottom of the working class” for a chance to become “elite”? And based on the fact that his readers overwhelmingly say, “keep the \$100,000,” he concludes they chose that decision because they at least imaginatively felt closer to the zillionaires than someone “barely scraping by.”

Now, to Drum's credit, he at least calls this \$100,000 earning household “upper middle class,” which is less inaccurate. But I wouldn't even consider someone working minimum wage 40 hours a week 52 weeks a year the “bottom of the working class,” given that so many people are having trouble getting full time hours in this day and age, but that person would make just \$15,080, just slightly more than half of what Drum considers the “bottom of the working class.”

But Drum doesn't consider the possible motivations of his readers. He doesn't consider the statistically likely possibility (even assuming MoJo online has a relatively affluent readership) that most of his readers would consider \$100,000 an improvement off where they are. That is, it may have nothing to do with a perception of whether being affluent is closer to being rich or being middle class, and everything to do with where some of them are personally. He might as well have asked at least some of his readers, “want a big raise, or want to increase risk?”

Now, I'm beating up Drum for his details, but I think his position is right: the affluent are closer to the rich than the members of the vanishing middle class. Though I might even suggest there are probably 4 positions here, the people who aren't making ends meet, the people who feel constant risk of failing to do so and sometimes don't, the people who spend all their money, and the rich. That is, this is all about risk, and everyone but the super rich feel the prevalence of economic insecurity, but the more affluent of us have a hard time imagining how

much more acutely the middle and working class experience that risk and so we tell myths about what most Americans experience financially and how normal we all are.

Frankly, I've been living with an engineer for the last decade (albeit one who wasn't working for some time), making my household far better off than most of this country (and even when I was a single grad student I recognized I was in a very elite position for someone making the \$\$ I was). So I can't be sure I'm much better than all this (though it probably helps that I see how much some of my neighbors, both in W MI and in Ann Arbor, have been struggling).

But that really points to an underlying problem. Even in spite of the insecurity in the media, as inequality grows worse and worse, members of the media with the biggest soapboxes grow more and more distant (both geographically and cognitively) from the people really suffering as the middle class disappears. To most of those big-soapbox people (though not the equally disappearing local media), \$30,000 or \$39,260 may feel so distant that it can only be understood as "barely scraping by." But if it is (and I do believe, for many families, it absolutely is), then those same big-soapboxes had better start screaming louder about it, because over a third of this country is in that plight.

Or maybe CNN can replace both Begala and Matalin with 4 members of the middle class each, so we can start hearing what's really going on in America.