

DO REPUBLICANS WISH THEY RETROACTIVELY HAD LET NEWT SUSTAIN HIS BAIN ATTACKS?

[youtube]BLWnB9FGmWE[/youtube]

Two soundbites from the Sunday shows have made a big stink: Mitt Romney's former Bain partner, Ed Conard, admitting that Mitt was legally CEO of Bain until 2002. And GOP fixer Ed Gillespie, distancing Mitt from the outsourcing Bain did by insisting Mitt had "retroactively retired" before all the bad stuff happened but while (Conard confirmed) he was legally CEO.

All that's on top of the fact that Mitt was profiting mightily from this vulture capitalism and siphoning the money to his offshore havens in Bermuda and Cayman Islands, which we're not yet really talking about.

More telling, though, is the list of Republicans now calling on Mitt to release more his tax returns:

- Columnist Bill Kristol
- AL Governor Robert Bentley
- Lobbyist and former MS Governor Haley Barbour
- Columnist George Will
- Strategist Matt Dowd
- Strategist Ana Navarro
- Strategist John Weaver

Now, none of these people—with the possible exception of Barbour—are big insiders who have any leverage over Mitt. Moreover, I can't think of any way that any of them would definitely know the content of Mitt's tax returns.

But what if they do? What if they know or suspect that those tax returns would expose not

just Mitt's role in Bain (including how much they paid him in salary in 2001 and 2002 to do, Mitt claims, absolutely nothing), but how much money he siphoned away to tax havens so as to avoid paying his fair share to the country he now wants to lead? What if they know the tax returns will doom his campaign, and want to force him to release them now, while they can still replace him with Chris Christie or someone else? (To be fair, with such a diverse mix of GOPers, I suspect they've got different motives for their comments, including—some of them—good faith belief releasing the forms would be best.)

Which makes me think back to the week in January when the GOP had the chance to fully expose what Mitt did at Bain—with the video Newt's SuperPAC released above—but backed off that chance. (h/t ZachBeauchamp for finding a working copy)

Newt released the video on January 7. By January 10, Newt accused Mitt of undermining capitalism. But then, on January 11, he reversed himself, claiming he overstepped and asking his SuperPAC to edit the video, using the same claims of inaccuracy advanced by fact checkers that have foundered on the obvious facts included in SEC filings now. But by January 17, he was calling on Mitt to release his tax returns. Newt won the South Carolina primary on January 21. On January 24, Mitt released a single tax return, showing he paid very little in taxes and had tax shelters in Switzerland (now closed), Bermuda, and Cayman Islands, but revealing nothing about what he did in the key years in 2001 and 2002. Since Mitt won the nomination, Newt has even warned Democrats not to attack Mitt on the same terrible Bain record he himself did.

I sort of get the feeling Newt knows what's in Mitt's tax returns. Indeed, I've seen oblique tweets from a few Republicans this weekend saying "I told you so" and paying off debts, leading me to believe more than a few Republicans tried to warn their party that this Bain thing would blow up and are now being vindicated.

In any case, I wonder (as does Steve Benen) whether Republicans are trying to claim a mulligan, now that this Bain record has come back into play. I wonder if they're wishing that Newt had at least sustained his attacks on Mitt's Bain record, so they wouldn't be saddled with such a toxic—and potentially worsening problem—in their candidate. That's not to say the GOP actually wanted Newt to beat Romney with these attacks; he's guilty of the same arrogance and corruption, if on a smaller scale. That's not to say they liked the way obvious attacks on Bain discredited a kind of capitalism that they not only support, but is heavily funding the GOP side of this campaign (the Democratic side, too, though not as generously as it did in 2008). But had Newt sustained that attack, they probably wouldn't be dealing with Mitt's meltdown right now, and probably wouldn't be dealing with Mitt, the candidate, at all.

For the record, there's one Republican who has definitely seen Mitt's tax returns. As Brian Beutler pointed out the other day, McCain's former campaign manager Steve Schmidt saw 20 years of Mitt's tax returns when vetting Mitt to be John McCain's Veep. And at least in January—he has remained conspicuously silent during this latest flap—Schmidt said Mitt shouldn't release anymore tax returns.

I think that he's the front-runner in the race. I think he's the most likely person to be the nominee of the party. And I would never advise him to disadvantage himself with issues like his taxes, against what is precedent for campaigns.

I think that he will probably do what presidents and vice presidents typically have done with regard to the release of their taxes. But if it was good enough for John Kerry, it ought to be good enough for Mitt Romney. He shouldn't release information that disadvantages himself and opens up a lot of attacks.

~~(I've asked Beutler for the date of this quote it sounds like it came before Mitt released any tax returns, but I'm not clear if it came after Newt had released the video.)~~
Update: Schmidt made these comments on January 10, the last day of Newt's attack on Bain's record. Interesting.