

Briefing Book: If you're defending, you're losing

Contributed by J.D. Piro

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It's been almost 20 years since a Lewisboro town supervisor won a contested re-election. So it's interesting that the Lewisboro Democratic Party has announced a search for a town supervisor candidate. Democrat Ed Brancati holds the job today, but liberals apparently need a back-up plan, given electoral history and the incumbent's erratic performance.

When you're defending in politics, Bill Kristol has said, you're losing. Especially when, as in Lewisboro, liberals defend Mr. Brancati's tax-and-spend policies by conceding conservative criticisms.

Did Mr. Brancati pass the biggest town tax increase in more than a decade? Yes, he did, they admit. But they maintain that Lewisboro taxpayers can afford to pay higher taxes. The fact that taxpayers need their money, especially during a recession — and actually have a better claim to it than the government does — never occurs to them. (Of course, some Obama cabinet appointees can't bother paying taxes, but we digress.)

Besides, liberals say, what are people complaining about? The town budget is "so small" — it's "only" \$12 million, give or take. Go bother the school board, Mr. Brancati has said, that's where the big bucks are. Relativism, moral or otherwise, is a poor substitute for reasoning. Using liberal logic, every state and local budget is immune from criticism, since the federal budget is larger. Besides, does anyone *really* think Briefing Book doesn't write enough about the school board?

Did Mr. Brancati dally for six months before moving town government funds out of a money-losing investment? Yes, but — and now we're quoting from the left side of this page — it's "not as if the town's money had been handed over to Bernie Madoff." We admire our colleague's confessed partisanship, but liberals should think twice before printing yard signs proclaiming "Re-elect Ed Brancati — He's Not Bernie Madoff!"

Did two finance directors quit on Mr. Brancati? Well, yes, if you're going to nitpick, but he only appointed one of them. Losing a key employee, it seems, only counts if Mr. Brancati hired that employee. Under that reasoning, most town government employees could resign and it would not reflect poorly on Mr. Brancati's management.

Did Mr. Brancati submit a late budget? Yes, and here's where our liberal friends wander away from the facts and start getting — how do we say this nicely? — let's try "creative." Mr. Brancati submitted a late budget, they acknowledge, but that's because the Republican budgets (the ones he voted for) created such a mess that he needed more time to fix things. We like that answer, especially the "yes" part. Too bad that's not what happened.

Back in November, Mr. Brancati announced that he had a budget — not that he was still working on one, but that he was finished and that he was proposing an 11% tax increase. Then, after the town government published a notice inviting the public to see the budget, Mr. Brancati couldn't produce a copy, saying: "I don't know exactly what you need to see." Just imagine the liberal laughter if George W. Bush had said that.

When Mr. Brancati finally produced a budget, it had a gap of well more than \$1 million between the town's expenses and the town's revenues. He closed that gap by more spending — his budget spends most of the town's surplus and raises taxes. He said this was necessary because of the mess left by his predecessors' budgets, which Mr. Brancati supported, making him complicit in whatever "mess" he might have inherited.

Cleaning up a "mess," however, should not mean throwing money at the problem. Mr. Brancati, whose government mentors included Al Gore and Nita Lowey, believes otherwise. His "massive clean-up of town finances" involved raiding the surplus, raising taxes and "cutting" expenses. If you were wondering by how much Mr. Brancati's budget "cut" expenses, the answer is just 1.8%. Squint and you can see it. In the real world, that's called a rounding error.

Last week, Mr. Brancati, with one eye on Briefing Book and the other on the Democratic nomination, wrote a column defending his first year in office and compared Lewisboro's town taxes (in his example, \$946) to Somers' town taxes (\$992). Again, relativism is a poor substitute for reasoning, but his example was useful, as it illustrated an entirely different point.

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The town government of Somers (population 20,000) delivers services to 8,000 more people than live in Lewisboro (population 12,000). Somers manages this with a municipal budget that is posted on time and on its Web site. In 2009, the Somers town budget will total some \$12.5 million, 11% higher than the budget Mr. Brancati has now spent two months defending. And when you're defending ...