

A 'bad cocktail' of politics, charity

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If you visit the Web site of the Operation Good Neighbor Foundation, you'll come away with the impression that it is a little charity that is based in Bryn Mawr and does good deeds.

These days, there's hardly any mention of its founder. Except for one brief reference, he's become a nonperson, a la the old Soviet days.

Don't be deceived. The founder of Operation Good Neighbor is Sen. Rick Santorum, and he is intertwined with this charity to this day.

Since 2001, the foundation has served as a platform for Santorum to espouse "compassionate conservatism." It has served, de facto, as a privately financed source of WAMs - an acronym for "walking around money," the grants pols so love to spread among groups to build goodwill and burnish their image.

In the spring, when I first looked into Operation Good Neighbor, Santorum's presence was hard to ignore. The Web site featured 34 pictures of the senator, most in the same pose: standing amid smiling recipients, handing over oversized checks, usually in the amount of \$10,000.

The charity claims to have given out more than \$700,000 since its inception. It rarely gives to the same group twice. It does not offer sustained support. It prefers one-shot (or, rather, one-photograph) deals.

I have a problem with foundations founded by pols, and I am not the only one. As IRS Commissioner Michael Everson told the National Journal recently: "Politics, money and charities make for a bad cocktail."

WAM-a-rama

Everson was commenting on the recent trend of pols creating or being closely connected to foundations. The list includes Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, and Democratic Rep. Alan Mollohan of West Virginia.

One problem is transparency.

If I contribute \$2,100 to the Santorum campaign (the individual limit under law), it will be duly recorded and open for the public to see.

If I give \$27,900 to Operation Good Neighbor, though, my name and amount of donation remain secret. As an added benefit, I get to deduct the donation from my taxes.

Now, I ask you: How does Rick Santorum see my gift? As a donor, I hope he sees it as a lump sum - \$30,000 donated by his pal, Tom.

In the spring, after bad mojo settled around these foundations, Sen. Max Baucus (D., Mont.) offered an amendment to require foundations started by elected officials to disclose the names and gifts of all donors who gave more than \$250.

For the millisecond that amendment was alive, Santorum supported it, according to Rick Cohen, the recently retired director of the National Center for Responsive Philanthropy.

The amendment failed in committee, though Baucus has since introduced it as a separate bill.

Open your books

Accordingly, this summer my colleague Carrie Budoff wrote to Operation Good Neighbor, asking it to disclose its donors and their gifts.

Last week, she heard back. The foundation declined to disclose, saying it wanted to respect the privacy of donors.

When I told Cohen, his reaction was: "He cosponsors that [Baucus] amendment and then he refuses to reveal his donors? He has no shame."

Someone say "Amen."

In the midst of a difficult reelection campaign, Santorum has sought to erase his ties to the foundation.

When radio host Don Imus asked him about it earlier this year, the senator replied: "I try to keep my relationship as just someone who sort of shows up at events to help folks raise money and take pictures with organizations that receive the grants. I don't have any involvement in who gets these grants... [or] involvement in raising the money directly. I don't ask anybody for money, and to be honest with you, for the most part, I don't really know that many people who give to the charity."

Translated: I have nothing to do with it, except to show up to take the credit.

I only have a transcript of the interview, so I don't know if Imus laughed at Santorum's

statement.

I sure did.

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