

THE POLITICS BLOG

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Gambling Nation: A Democracy of Risk for Risk's Sake

By [Charles P. Pierce](#)

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I could have used a better revelation at the window on Saturday, when the laughing gods of chance — those scimey bastids — suggested that I drop a little dough on Optimizer [at the Belmont Stakes](#). As it happens, the laughing gods of chance combine the obvious tactical clairvoyance of Mark Penn with the sense of humor of a tackhammer, and Optimizer may well still be running, as far as I know, but, as it turns out, he wasn't the real revelation. This is what the real revelation was:

The United States of America is now nothing more than a place where you gamble.

Consider: Most every state in the Union, including the Commonwealth (God save it!) here, would rather build 20 casinos than risk raising taxes a dime, as though gambling itself were not a brutal tax. (How do I know this? Because once, long ago, on the night Mark McGwire and his pharmacist went past Roger Maris and his bartender for the single-season home run record, I sat in a casino in Tunica, Mississippi, and watched a 300-pound woman with oxygen tubes up her nose feed quarters into a slot machine while wearing a T-shirt that said, "Jesus Is The Answer." This was the same trip on which I saw a billboard outside Vicksburg that suggested, "Sell Your Car For Cash.") The entire Republican economic plan is one long gamble on a bunch of economic theories that already have failed twice in my lifetime. Ask even earnest young liberals how you manage to get a middle class without a manufacturing base, an active government, and strong unions, and you get the same kind of shrug you get along the rail when you ask someone why they bet the 5-horse when the creature plainly has hooves the size of a country ham. Ask Willard Romney the same thing, and he makes even less sense.

Get a hunch, bet a bunch.

Whaddaya say we put that on the money?

I saw it [in Wisconsin](#), where the [voters](#) actually took seriously (twice!) the [arguments](#) made by the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel's* editorial board that Scott Walker was worth having as governor because at least he would do *something*, and that made him entirely worth the risk. It's like people took all that Neustadt that we were taught in political-science after JFK got waxed and turned it into *The Racing Form*. It is always better to do something than to do nothing. This is how we got to President C-Plus Augustus going with his "gut," which was, admittedly, brighter than his head, but not by much.

Seriously now, does anyone really know what comes next? We are treating people like zombie-eyed granny-starver Paul Ryan, and Senator [Aqua Buddha](#) down in Kentucky, like serious people while they flirt lustily with a dystopic and Dickensian future, and we do it because we've been trained to believe that taking a chance on anything is better than standing still. People who know how to run casinos — which is to say, everyone who's run a casino except Donald Trump — got reach by demonstrating to the rubes that it was better to leave the showroom and come onto the floor, and to leave the money on the table instead of wandering to the cashier's window and thence to the noodle bar. In a country where every convenience store is now a Keno parlor, where it takes 10 minutes to buy a banana because the elderly pensioner in front of you is scratching 200 tickets in a desperate search for a \$20 payday, is it any surprise that Social Security has fallen out of favor? Social Security was a sure thing, and sure things are boring, if everybody's in on them.

Wall Street's only the most obvious example of this, and the most crooked example, besides. But it seems like the entire system is lurching toward a situation in which it hits on 19 and hopes for the best. Listening to Willard Romney talk about his economic plan is like listening to one of those in-house infomercials on craps or roulette that the casino pipes into the guest rooms upstairs. He is going to "revive" the private sector and "create jobs." Now, all sentient beings who have lived through the past 20 years know that the "private sector" in this country is primarily concerned with gaming profits for the investor class. In short, the "private sector" is all about gambling with other people's money. That's how Willard got rich, after all.

Risk can be a good thing. I wish the president took more of them. But risk for risk's sake — what my grandmother assuredly would have called "throwing good money after bad" — is no way to run a republic. Democracy can tolerate a lot of things, but it cannot tolerate an economy based on the 10-minute banana.