

A conversation with former IRS Commissioner Mark W. Everson

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Mark W. Everson served as as commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service under George W. Bush from 2003-2007. He offered his take on the revelation that the agency singled out conservative groups in a Tuesday morning interview with The Fix.

FIX: What do you make of this entire situation, based on what you've read and heard?

MWE: I'm quite saddened by these developments. In my experience, the service does its level best to be even-handed and steer clear of anything that could be interpreted as biased or political in any way. I do feel this is a very serious situation because it undermines trust of Americans in the IRS and ultimately in the government as a whole. So, it's very serious and warrants a complete and impartial investigation.

FIX: The IRS official who oversees tax-exempt groups said Friday that the extra scrutiny was not motivated by politics, but rather it was misguided attempt at efficiency. In your experience, is that a plausible explanation?

MWE: Well, it is certainly plausible that [it] is the genesis of the problem. Because if you get an influx of applications, the applications do need to be dealt with. And people would naturally seek efficient ways to do that. That having been said, there needs to be basic supervision up the line that says how things are done and makes sure they are being done properly, and particularly in this area, in a balanced way. All the numbers that will come out now [in hearings] ... they will look at all the applications, they will get the clearance to do that and they will know just how many were conservative-leaning and how many were liberal-leaning. But even if there were four conservative groups for one liberal group, the criteria to evaluate them needed to be balanced and indicate just how you would make those decisions so that the keywords, or whatever they were doing, wouldn't tie only to the conservatives. They totally bungled that, clearly.

FIX: The Post reported that then-commissioner Douglas Shulman was made aware of this stuff in May 2012. If something like this had been brought to your attention, what steps would you have taken?

MWE: A fundamental obligation of the commissioner is to be square with Congress. And that means both sides of the aisle. So it's critical to establish what was known by the front office and when.

FIX: What are the likely consequences you anticipate on what you see?

MWE: If individuals haven't been held accountable for the improper handling of the process, they should be. But the broader concern is this: When I got to the service it was still coming out of the 1990s, which was a very difficult period for the IRS. And because of the difficult scrutiny the agency faced in the 1990s, people were reluctant to

do their jobs. The blunt reality is that the IRS can't pick and choose which laws it enforces. And it has any number of tough assignments. My fear is that from this whole period that people will pull back and they will be reluctant to aggressively enforce the law as they should. That's a potential problem you get with this.

FIX: Do you think we are going to see people lose their jobs or specific disciplinary measures taken?

MWE: I'm not going to comment on that. It's inappropriate to comment on that until all the facts have come out.

FIX: Anything else you take away from all this?

MWE: I did not see behavior like this at the agency. I was very proud to be associated with people who I felt called it right down the middle. Secondly, the facts that have been laid out so far warrant a full and impartial investigation.

Mark W. Everson is vice chairman of alliantgroup, a provider of specialty tax services. He served as Commissioner of Internal Revenue from 2003 through 2007.