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## YOU CAN TAKE THE MAN OUT OF CHICAGO...

### *President Obama's appointments belie his reformist message*

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Who says that life doesn't afford second chances? With a one-time tax delinquent, [Timothy Geithner](#), installed as Treasury secretary, and [Eric Holder](#), the former Justice official who helped Marc Rich get a pardon confirmed as Attorney General, no one can say that our God-fearing new President doesn't believe in the power of redemption.

Geithner's troubles date back to the period following his service as a Treasury undersecretary in the Clinton administration. In 2006 an I.R.S. audit revealed that Geithner had not remitted required self-employment taxes in 2003 and 2004. To settle things he coughed up more than \$20,000. In fact, Geithner was liable for more, but the I.R.S. couldn't force him to pay because absent proof of fraudulent intent [the law](#) limits imposing back taxes to three years. And as one might expect, Geithner didn't volunteer.

When nominated to Treasury's top spot Geithner experienced a remarkable transformation. Within days a check for \$25,970, covering taxes and penalties for 2001 and 2002 was in the hands of the I.R.S. As one might expect, he explained the lapses -- as well as \$4000-plus he incorrectly claimed in dependent care credits -- as innocent errors of omission. Thanks to a forgiving boss, Geithner now leads a department whose employment standards (as your writer, a former Treasury man well knows) would instantly disqualify any ordinary applicant with delinquencies an iota as serious.

Although the blunder that reddened Eric Holder's face is different, its implications are remarkably similar. For reasons that either did or didn't have anything to do with Marc Rich's contributions to the Democratic Party and the Clinton library, President Clinton was anxious to grant a pardon to the indicted tax cheat, then in his second decade of living it up in Switzerland while thumbing his nose at the Feds. Holder declared himself "neutral, leaning towards favorable" on the question, a sleigh of words that he later explained meant that he had been neither for nor against granting an incalculable benefit under circumstances that would make a Chicago alderman blush.

Or not. Everyone out of diapers knows that Holder's new boss is an experienced hand at Windy City politics. President Obama is also a lawyer, which to some may sound like a frightful combination. To his credit, he came in with a reformist zeal the

likes of which we haven't seen since Jerry "Moonbeam" Brown was squiring Linda Ronstadt. Now, though, we're left wondering. Does the President agree that our nation's chief financial and law enforcement officers should be held to the highest possible standards? Or does our popular new leader suffer from the same moral blind spot that nearly brought down his Democratic predecessor?

These are important questions. Treasury and Justice are responsible for enforcing the bulk of our nation's laws. If we even half-expect tax sleuths and G-men to follow the straight and narrow their leaders must be men and women of irreproachable integrity, indisposed to draw fatuous, lawyerly distinctions between right and wrong -- distinctions, one might add, without which Secretary Geithner and Attorney General Holder could have never been confirmed.

Maybe the message is finally getting out. Only a day after President Obama declared his wholehearted support for Tom Daschle's confirmation, the ill-starred nominee for Health and Human Services bowed out. Suffering from serious bouts of taxitis and multiple personality (he couldn't make up his mind whether he had been a lobbyist or not) the former Majority Leader apparently concluded that his web was too tangled for even Obama's talented spinners to successfully parse.

Our promising new President's missteps are a shaky start for someone who led the world to believe that in his Administration, "I" wouldn't stand for the selfishness that led to the present crisis but for the integrity that is the cornerstone of American democracy. It's the reason why millions of new voters proudly marched to the polls and why an old white guy gave him two-hundred bucks.

Please, President Obama, don't let us down. You're not in Chicago anymore.