

Aaron Ball Quoted in Houston Chronicle on Obama's Tax Plan

Houston Chronicle

March 21, 2009

Aaron Ball, a Member at Gray Reed & McGraw, was quoted on President Obama's tax plan in the March 21st edition of the *Houston Chronicle*.

Aaron's practice is concentrated in the manufacturing and oil & gas industries. Aaron structures, negotiates and manages complex business transactions such as acquisitions and the planning and organization of business ventures. These transactions frequently involve corporate and tax planning issues in many different countries. Aaron is experienced in working with foreign counsel and other professional advisors to plan sophisticated transactions and business structures such as holding companies, joint ventures, and other commercial arrangements. In, addition to his admissions to practice in numerous U.S. jurisdictions, Aaron is also admitted to the Law Society of England and Wales as a Solicitor.

Who makes \$250,000? And how do higher taxes go over?

By Claudia Feldman, Houston Chronicle

After the initial flap over the proposed tax hike for America's top earners, a question lingers:

Who are these top earners?

Technically speaking, they are families earning more than \$250,000 a year, the folks President Barack Obama is asking to pay more in taxes beginning in 2011.

But who are they, really? We set out to learn more about them, to find out how they got where they are and what they think about picking up a bigger share of the nation's tab.

Aaron Ball, a corporate lawyer, grew up in Kentucky in one of the 25 poorest counties in the United States. His parents were schoolteachers. His best friend lived in an old yellow school bus.

As a young man, Ball spent two years at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, then worked his way through Butler University in Indianapolis, followed by law school.

By the time he graduated, he owed more than \$125,000 in student loans. It took him eight years to pay off those debts.

Today, at 37, Ball is vociferously against the proposed tax hike for wealthy Americans. If he had to sum up his views in two sentences, they might read like this: Higher tax bills will hurt small-business owners. And they shouldn't be hurt right now because they need to be creating jobs to help the economy.

When Ball fields questions about himself, he says he shops with coupons, indulges in Shipley doughnuts and South Park, and treasures Winston Churchill's books on the Second World War.

Here's what most people don't understand about his job:

"I care. To me, being a corporate lawyer is more than documentation of a transaction or preparing a contract. I feel personally and emotionally vested in the success of each of my clients. I fret over details, lie awake at night thinking about their problems and daydream about their possibilities."

His proudest accomplishment?

Setting up a leadership program for area teens called Youth Leadership America.

His tax bill last year?

"Higher than it should be."

'I've been poor'

Dikembe Mutombo, 42 and a venerable member of the Houston Rockets, supports the proposed tax hike.

"I'm rich, but I've been poor," he says, "and I know what it's like. It's very important to help the people who don't make it."

On the personal side:

He grew up in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, one of 10 brothers and sisters. Early on, he thought he wanted to be a doctor. At Georgetown University, while he played basketball, he majored in linguistics and diplomacy.

Today he speaks English, French, Portuguese, a little Spanish and three African languages. When he's in Houston, he lives off Allen Parkway, close to downtown and Toyota Center.

He shops for groceries at the Kroger on West Gray, and no question, people notice him. He's 7 feet 2.

"They love me there," he says.

He's a decent cook.

"I can make almost everything. I have to because my wife, Rose, and the kids live in Philadelphia."

He hates being separated from them. "But someone has to work and pay the bills."

Mutombo's guilty pleasure is going to the Galleria to buy presents for the family.

"It's something I can do to connect with them," he says.

The thing people don't understand about his job:

"You have to learn how to sleep one hour, two hours or three hours at a time. The only time we get a full eight hours is when the coach tells us, 'Don't come tomorrow.' But even then we are obligated to try to lift as many weights as we can so that we'll be strong and not find ourselves out of the league."

Mutombo is a multimillionaire. He worries nonstop about money, however, because he continues to support the \$30 million hospital he helped build in his homeland.

"I have 425 employees there," he says. "I'm trying to raise money for the doctors and for medicine for those who need it. Every day is a working day for me. I want to make life better for those not in my shoes."

And last year his tax bill was?

"A lot."

I 'don't think it's wise'

Restaurateur Tony Vallone supports Obama but opposes the tax hike idea.

"I just don't think it's wise at this time," he says.

Vallone grew up in Houston.

He shops at H-E-B Grocery.

His favorite restaurant is his own.

"Tony's, of course."

Menu favorites?

"I love any of the pastas and the rack of lamb."

His guilty pleasure?

"Any sweets. Chocolate. And Snickers bars."

The thing about his job people don't understand?

"The attention to detail that goes into running a fine restaurant. Every little thing is important. And you have to be there. You can't make decisions from the board room or the golf course."

His favorite big-box store is Costco.

His proudest accomplishment?

"The last meal I served my family."

And his tax bill last year?

"I'm not going to say."

Class gap is an influence

Larry Hokanson, founder of the luxury custom carpet company Hokanson Inc., supports the proposed tax increase.

He doesn't look forward to writing an even bigger check to the government, but he thinks the widening gaps between the rich, middle class and poor are dangerous. He also thinks Americans have to pay the piper after decades of overindulgence, and he includes himself in the overindulged category.

Hokanson grew up in Chicago in a middle-class family. Today he has clients scattered all over the world, and some of them are so wealthy they spend huge sums of money on floor coverings - just for their planes.

He's helped design rugs for three former presidents - both George Bushes and Bill Clinton. Hokanson had looked forward to helping Obama design a rug for the Oval Office, but the businessman certainly understood when the new president said now is not a good time to spend a lot on redecorating.

Hokanson's rugs and carpets range in price from \$2,000 to \$1.2 million. Two other big-name customers are Elton John and Vladimir Putin.

Hokanson lives near Memorial Park, shops for groceries at Kroger and, in his free time, devours political news and Russian history.

A reasonable start

Kathy Orton, 55 and a recently retired managing director at JPMorgan Chase, thinks a tax hike for her income bracket may be a reasonable way for us to start digging out of the mess we're in.

On a personal note:

She retired from the bank after working there for 33 years. She has a lawyer husband and two adult daughters, and she finds retirement a mixed bag.

"I'm planning to go back to work," she says. "I'm bored, and I miss the adrenaline rush of a stressful business environment."

She's a good cook; she recently made lobster macaroni and cheese, which her guests enjoyed. For her, guilty pleasures include chocolate, golf and massages.

She's very proud of her daughters, her favorite charity is the Alley Theatre, and she's not quite sure what her next job will be.

"I'm trying to keep my options open," she says.

'Lucky to have the money'

Rusty Hardin wants to make it perfectly clear: He will not grouse if his tax bill goes up. In fact, he considers himself lucky to have the money to pay.

He hasn't always had it this good. The 67-year-old trial lawyer spent much of his career working for the Harris County District Attorney's Office; he didn't start making big bucks until he went into private practice in 1990.

The thing about his job people don't understand?

"Sometimes people think juries don't get it," Hardin says. "But they do."

In his free time, he likes to play golf, follow the Rockets and read mysteries. His favorite clothing store is M Penner. His favorite bookstore is Murder by the Book, and he tries to drop by there every Saturday.

He is most proud of his children. One son is a public-school teacher in Chicago; the other is a Houston police officer.

Under Obama's proposed tax bill, their taxes will actually go down.