

When the real controversies legitimate the fake ones

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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It's true: [gay-rights groups](#), a [progressive church](#) and other liberal organizations have received not-so-special attention from the IRS in years past, as well as [more recently](#). It's true that [there's no clear evidence that IRS staffers were ideologically motivated](#) when they gave special scrutiny to Tea Party groups. It's true that, by design, the IRS does its work largely independent of the White House—[Obama couldn't fire the people at the Cincinnati office](#) if he wanted to. And yes: "social welfare" nonprofits need [more scrutiny and regulation](#), not less—assuming [they should even exist](#).

Still. The IRS kerfuffle might not be as bad as some people are saying it is, but it's definitely bad. It's unacceptable for the agency to selectively enforce the law, intentionally or otherwise. The whole system's integrity relies on it being applied fairly. And now [it's going to be even harder](#) for the IRS to move forward with clarifying the vague rules for nonprofits that were a big part of the problem in the first place.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department is under fire for [seizing a wide set of phone records from the Associated Press](#). It's not clear that the administration [did anything it's not allowed to do](#); the question is whether it *should* have that much power over the press, especially given that [it has other, less chilling options it could have pursued](#).

[E. J. Dionne is right](#) that these are very different situations; the political narrative of a "scandal week" for the Obama administration obscures more than it reveals. Some IRS staffers in Ohio made a bad judgment call as they tried to get through piles of applications. Back in Washington, Justice and the AP were at odds. Different actors, different issues at play, different consequences.

But the administration's opponents smell blood now, so [this is the narrative we're stuck with](#): Can you believe all the Big Government overreach lately? Exhibit A! Exhibit B! And the fact that exhibits A and B are legitimate problems can lend the less legitimate exhibits [C](#), [D](#) and so on a boost of credibility. It's no way to have a

national debate.

Jon Stewart nails it below (also curses a lot):

[\*\*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart\*\*](#)

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