

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher
President
melcher@shentel.net

Monday, April 2, 2002

THEY SAID IT

Daniel Pipes Director, Middle East Forum, Philadelphia, in April 15 issue of *Insight Magazine*.

“Militant Islam is a radical utopian ideology along the lines of fascism and Marxism-Leninism. Although the details differ, as with those ideologies, militant Islam seeks to use totalitarian means to overthrow governments, transform human beings and dominate the world. It is a formula that is all too familiar. If one knows anything about the barbarism of fascism or communism, one readily recognizes the same general threat from militant Islam.”

In The News

CHOOSING SIDES. Without question, the big news story last week was the growing intensity of the conflict between Israel and its Arab enemies, which could, as virtually every commentator on the subject has noted, (choose your cliché), escalate into something very big, skyrocket out of control, or turn into a major war.

I will write a longer piece on this subject at a later date. In the meantime, I would like to focus attention on the above quote from my old friend Dan Pipes, which, I believe, accurately characterizes the threat that is facing the United States, Israel, and the rest of the civilized world, for that matter.

For some 25 years now, the United States has labored under the mistaken belief that it could broker a lasting peace between Israel and its enemies if it just invested enough time, money, and high-level prestige into the project. While both sides in the dispute complained at various times that America was unfairly “taking sides,” the fact of the matter is that the United States, under five presidents (two Democrats and three Republicans) made a sincere effort to stay neutral at all

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
The Political Forum
8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359, e-mail melcher@shentel.net

times, in order to arrive at a truly just agreement, one that asked each side give a little in order to gain a true and lasting peace. Yes, mistakes were made, as the saying goes. But I don't think anyone could make a credible argument that the effort was not carried out in kindness and with respect for the dreams and aspirations of both sides.

Yet, during the entire time period of this process, a horrible new radical ideology was incubating within the Arab world, growing ever larger on a diet of hatred and distorted religiosity. This ideology was being nurtured not just in the Middle East, but throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, and, of course, the United States, in such diverse locations as Detroit, Brooklyn, Oklahoma City, and even little Herndon, Virginia. On occasion, it would venture out, like a young carnivore, to test its killing skills. And then, recently, it emerged onto the world stage, full-grown in all its ugliness, launching a series of barbaric suicide attacks on innocent civilians at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and dozens of sites in Israel.

Yeats asked the question in 1921.

“And what rough beast, its hour come round at least,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

Today we know the answer. The rough beast is, as Pipes points out, a barbaric new radical utopian ideology along the lines of fascism and Marxism-Leninism.

If this definition is too technical, you can turn for a different description to the words of Stephen Crane, written over a 100 years ago.

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said: "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter-bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."

This conflict is, in my opinion, no longer about Israel and its neighbors, or about Jews and Muslims. This is about a new threat to civilization. Its feeder roots cannot be traced to Voltaire's famous cry, *Ecrasez l'infame!* or to the rantings of Rousseau, as can those of Communism and Fascism. But its taproot is the same, descending into that dark place within the soul of every man, where envy, greed, and lust for power reside.

Immediately after September 11, President Bush announced that every nation in the world must "choose sides" in his newly-declared "war on terrorism." Today, radical Islam is echoing this challenge. Choose sides America, it says. Choose sides Europe. Choose sides Saudi Arabia,

Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan. Choose sides everyone. Choose sides in the war between Israel and radical Islam.

One wonders why the Bush administration seems surprised. Did no one in the White House know that Israel's radical Islamic enemies are the same people as America's radical Islamic enemies? Did no one in the White House see Arafat's people dancing in the streets on September 12? Did they not know that if America went to war with radical Islam, radical Islam would do all it could to bring Israel into the conflict in an effort to bring its fellow Arabs into the fray?

I think it won't work, but only time will tell. In the meantime, Bush's war against the world's latest scourge of murderous Utopian ideology is about to get considerably messier. It won't be defeat the bad guys in Afghanistan, then defeat the bad guys in Iraq, then defeat the bad guys in Iran, then do some clean up work in other areas, and then declare victory, as so many "experts" on television seem to believe. Radical Islam would prefer a war on many fronts, which, I believe, helps explain what is happening in Israel today.

Joe Camel, Ronald McDonald, Axis of Evil? Several years ago, when I was with Prudential Securities, my office hosted a conference in Washington where Arizona Senator John McCain was the dinner speaker. At that time, his *cause célèbre* was not campaign finance reform but legislation to punish the tobacco companies and enrich the trial lawyers.

During the Q&A after the speech, my old friend Claes Ryn, a professor at Catholic University and Chairman of the National Humanities Institute*, asked if this legislation wouldn't inevitably lead to the vilification of other industries, making them vulnerable to attacks by trial lawyers and politicians looking for new targets for higher taxes. Claes then asked whether McDonald's might not be the next target.

To say that the notoriously temperamental McCain "lost it" would be an understatement. His face reddened, the veins bulged in his neck, and he suggested in a highly pugnacious way that it might be "crooked insurance companies who rip off their policyholders etc. etc. etc.", reflecting, I assumed, his understanding that he was speaking at a conference hosted by an insurance company. He then went on to argue, very intensely, that that was a spurious red herring floated by the tobacco industry as a means of defeating his well-meaning legislation.

I mention this story now because last week *The Washington Times* noted that the federal government has changed its BMI (Body Mass Index, calculated from height and weight) standards, and as a result "30 million Americans overnight went from being government approved to 'overweight' or 'obese.'" In fact, the story went on to say, "America is suddenly so fat that the Surgeon General is now warning of an 'obesity epidemic.'"

The paper then quoted Mike Burita, a spokesperson for the Center for Consumer Freedom as saying that "activist groups are using these new statistics to fuel their agenda for 'fat taxes' on snack foods and tobacco-style calls for action lawsuits against restaurants." Burita then added that, "Some activists have gone so far as to compare Ronald McDonald to Joe Camel."

If you think Buria is just blowing smoke, check out his website www.consumerfreedom.com for some interesting quotes from such diverse sources as the Center for Science in the Public Interest and Rand Corporation researchers favoring proposals for new taxes on soft drinks and snack foods and outlining efforts to curtail the “in-your-face availability” of alcohol and “bad” foods.

No word yet whether this will become the centerpiece for a new John McCain crusade, but last week California State Senator Deborah Ortiz jumped on the proverbial bandwagon, proposing a tax on soft drinks as a means of helping to reduce “skyrocketing rates of childhood obesity.”

As Kurt Vonnegut would have said, “And so it goes.”

* (The National Humanities Institutes, on whose board I sit, is, by the way a wonderful non-profit organization that could really use a little financial help. Extensive information on the organization, the people involved, its mission, and its work, can be found at www.nhinet.org. One paragraph from that website might give you an idea of why I so much admire Claes and NHI President Joe Baldacchino, and the work they are doing.

The National Humanities Institute is working to reconstitute the humanities, which over time will influence the fundamental direction of society as a whole.

One of the great illusions of our age is that it is politicians who shape society’s future. This belief has long obfuscated the deepening problems of our civilization and the preconditions for overcoming them. The ability of politicians to act is in reality severely circumscribed by the deep-seated beliefs and aspirations of a people and its elites. These beliefs and aspirations, which can be changed only with difficulty, emerge from society’s moral, intellectual, and aesthetical life. The direction of politics and the economy is ultimately traceable to this source.

No Good Will Come Of This. Speaking of John McCain, his campaign finance reform measure was signed into law last week by President Bush, who had promised to veto it during the primaries and who, while signing it, expressed his view that parts of it might be unconstitutional.

Much has been written about the details of this awful piece of legislation and Bush’s awful decision to sign it, so I won’t dwell on the many facets of those twin subjects, except to say that each time I read about this thing I form the image of myself as a very old man muttering under his breath “no good will come of this.”

This legislation was spawned in the corruption of the savings and loan debacle, and kept alive by an unhealthy combination of ego, ignorance, sanctimony, and political chicanery. No good will come of it. It won’t stop the corruption and it could make it worse. Like fumigating the bedbugs in a cheap motel room, it just drives them to another room.

If, as John McCain claims, taking money from individuals or groups of individuals is corrupting him and some of his colleagues, then each and every one of them should stop doing it immediately instead of emulating St. Augustine's famous prayer, "O God make me chaste—but don't do it just yet."

The fact is, as I have said over and over again for many years in columns about this legislation, the growth in corruption in Washington in the past several decades is derivative of the growth of power in Washington during the same period. The federal government today exercises close to complete control over virtually every aspect of the life of every individual American and every group of individual Americans. Who can blame them for forming into what McCain and his cronies disdainfully describe as "special interest groups" in an attempt to protect their hopes, dreams, aspirations, and very lives from this colossus of raw power?

As Steve Soukup and I wrote in a piece entitled "The Iron Biangle," the bottom line on this legislation is that it dramatically weakens one leg of the famous Iron Triangle of modern American government, made up of politicians, bureaucrats and individuals. In doing so, it destabilizes the entire structure, vesting almost complete power in the hands of the politicians and bureaucrats at the expense of the nation's individual citizens.

My first piece on this subject was written in 1997 and entitled "The New Political Paradigm." Subsequent pieces built on this one. The following are the foundational paragraphs.

But government today has the power, vested in mountains of laws, regulations and court rulings, to destroy or badly cripple any business, or any industry, in the United States, large or small, whether it be a meat packing plant in Nebraska, a restaurant in Brooklyn, or the entire tobacco industry. No union boss in U.S. history has ever had this kind of pure, unadulterated muscle.

Government today also has the kind of power to kill, maim, malign and confiscate the property of individual citizens that the nation's founding fathers would have found astonishing, as was discovered, for example, by such a diverse lot as the Branch Davidians in Texas, a falsely accused "terrorist" in Atlanta, and dozens of ordinary farmers, who have been pilloried for filling in low spots in their own fields, which the EPA bureaucrats now call "wet lands."

The scope and raw power of the tens of thousands of nameless, faceless bureaucrats in this nation is almost beyond comprehension. Somewhere, someplace taxpayers are paying people to write hundreds of pages of complicated regulations specifying exactly which public housing residents can own a pet (old people who need companionship), how many black men and how many woman of any color should be fire fighters in Podunk, Iowa, and (how's this for hubris?), how many doctors is "too many."

And now McCain and his cohorts, with the help of the hapless George W. Bush, want to protect this leviathan from the corrupting interests of the nation's citizens. In the final analysis, the answer to the problem of rampant corruption in Washington is to either lessen the power of the

central government, or elect politicians who are not so easily led unto temptation. In the meantime, no good will come from strengthening the power of the bureaucrats and politicians at the expense of the nation's citizens.

Clinton's Corner

For some reason there has been a lot of public attention lately on the man Bob (R. Emmett) Tyrell used to call "America's priapic president." Besides two new books, one by Joe Klein and another by Benjamin Wittes, there is a long feature in this week's *Newsweek* on Bill, and, of course, very recently, there was the release of Robert Ray's final report on the Whitewater mess and (my favorite) the release of the House Government Reform Committee's full report on the presidential pardons. This latter report, which is several hundred pages long and can be found at www.house.gov/reform/newindex/presidential_pardons.htm, is a truly amazing compilation of the sleazy dealings by the Clinton clan and their cronies in their final days in Washington.

But, in my opinion, no one has ever, or ever will, sum up the Clinton years as well as Father Richard John Neuhaus did just one year ago in the April 2001 issue of his great monthly magazine *First Things*. I loved this comment from Father Neuhaus when he made it, but have had no way to share it with friends and clients for the past year. Now I have. So here goes.

"As faithful readers know, I have contended all along that the slimy psychodrama of the Clinton presidency was not an accurate indicator of what is called the American character. It was more a matter of a nation watching with fascinated horror as the toilet backed up and overflowed into its living room. I expect that the word 'unprecedented' and the phrase 'this has never happened before' were used more times in the Clinton administration than in the last five presidencies combined. It was part soap opera, part Al Capp's *Dogpatch*, and, with Mrs. Clinton, a generous slice of *Macbeth*. People were variously amused, appalled, and outraged, but nobody knew how to fix the toilet. Except for the managers of the impeachment, but it was finally decided that their price was too high."

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