

The Political Forum

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

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THEY SAID IT

The Children's Crusade," by Henry Wordsworth Longfellow

*What is this I read in history, Full of marvel, full of mystery,
Difficult to understand? Is it fiction, is it truth?
Children in the flower of youth, Heart in heart, and hand in hand,
Ignorant of what helps or harms, Without armor, without arms,
Journeying to the Holy Land!*

*O the simple, child-like trust! O the faith that could believe
What the harnessed, iron-mailed Knights of Christendom had failed,
By their prowess, to achieve, They the children, could and must?*

*Little thought the Hermit, preaching Holy Wars to knight and baron,
That the words dropped in his teaching, His entreaty, his beseeching,
Would by children's hands be gleaned, And the staff on which he leaned
Blossom like the rod of Aaron*

ARAFAT'S CHILDREN'S CRUSADE. THE BEGINNING OF THE END? In 1212, a French shepherd named Stephen and a German youth named Nicholas each proclaimed separately that Christ had personally appealed to him to lead a children's crusade to "take back the Holy Lands from the infidels." Stephen assembled 20,000 young people and led them to Marseilles where he told them God would divide the ocean and allow them to reach Palestine "dryshod." Needless to say, the ocean didn't part. Instead, the kids crowded onto seven ships and sang songs of victory as they sailed off. Two of the ships wrecked off Sardinia. The other five headed toward North Africa, where the children were sold into slavery. Nicholas and his 30,000 followers were somewhat more fortunate. While many of them died along the way, most of them made it to Genoa, but no ships would carry them to Palestine, so they plodded homeward.

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History provides differing accounts of these events. But sources generally agree that all responsible adults at the time, both clerics and laity, opposed both Stephen's and Nicholas' ventures. Parents are said to have desperately tried to keep their kids at home. France's King Philip II refused to fund Stephen's endeavor and ordered him to go back to his sheep. Pope Innocent III told Nicholas and his followers to go home. The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, hanged the ship owners who sold the kids into slavery. And Longfellow, who immortalized these two "children's crusades" in this well-known poem cited above, noted that the children were not deliberately targeted by the "hermits," who promoted the crusades, but "gleaned" their enthusiasm for the effort unbeknownst to the adults to whom the entreaties were directed.

Fast forward now to the early 21st century, and history records that once again children are sacrificing their lives in an effort to retake parts of the Holy Land from "infidels." Several things are different now, of course. For starters, there is the fact that it is Muslims today, not Christians, who are organizing the "crusade," and Jews, not Muslims, who are defending their turf. Also interesting is the fact that, this time, the "responsible adults," in whose charge the children are, do not deplore their effort. In fact, virtually the entire Arab world is encouraging it.

"Suicide schools" recruit and train youths to strap explosives around themselves and blow themselves up. Wealthy Saudi "princes" join murderous tyrants like Saddam Hussein in offering bribes to Arab families to encourage their children to destroy themselves in the name of "martyrdom." Muslim "holy men" torture the tenets of their ancient religion to make "suicide," which the Koran expressly prohibits as an "unpardonable sin," not just acceptable but a sanctioned "religious act."

I believe, however, that one thing is the same, namely that this is the beginning of the end of the battle. The "children's crusades" were not the absolute end of Christian Europe's effort to take Palestine. But they were a clear signal that the end was in sight; that the adults were losing their collective enthusiasm for it. And while Arafat's suicide brigades won't end the Arab crusade to drive the Jews out of the Middle East, it will, I believe, be viewed by history as that point at which a majority of the most influential people involved in the campaign came to recognize that it was a futile cause. In short, the kids are always the last to know.

Trying to draw parallels between Arafat's crusade and those of medieval Europe is fraught with problems, of course. But basically, the political leaders of Europe in the early 13th century decided that they had more pressing things to do at the dawn of the new millennium than to worry about who ruled Palestine. My guess is that the political leaders of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and other Arab nations are in the process of deciding the same thing about Arafat's crusade.

No doubt, most think that driving the Jews out of the Middle East is a worthwhile cause. But, my guess is that many are wondering how wise it is to follow a corrupt old killer, with a hankering for celebrity and graft, into a war that could rapidly deteriorate into a massive regional conflagration involving "weapons of mass destruction," and put them on the wrong side of a conflict involving "the world's only remaining super power."

In article dated last January 2, and entitled “2002: Interesting Times Ahead,” I made my annual forecasts for this year. The final one, Prediction No. 7, was that “relations between Israel and its neighbors will, at the end of 2002, be more stable than they have been in decades.” I described this as an “extremely optimistic prediction,” and defended it as follows.

This is not to say that there will be peace between Israel and its enemies. What I believe instead is that there will be an absence of war based on a grudging appreciation on the part of the Palestinians and other Arab nations that they cannot drive Israel out of existence and that the cost of continuing to try is prohibitive both in lives and economic growth . . .

I believe . . . that the key to stable Arab-Israeli relations is not endless peace talks that end with American pressure on Israeli to grant concessions, which weaken Israel militarily, and result in political turmoil within Israel itself, which weakens it internally. . . .

I think “W” may be the first American president to fully grasp the concept that, while formal peace between Israel and its neighbors may be an impossible dream, open hostilities can be avoided by helping to promote an Israel that is strong enough to discourage open aggression against it by its enemies.

I am aware that drawing attention to this particular prediction is a bit risky right now, given the ongoing dust up in the Middle East. But, quite frankly, I think my prediction is right on track. Arafat is in trouble, as is his dream of destroying Israel. He’s down to sending the children in to die for him. As I said several months ago, I don’t expect peace between the Palestinians and Israel, but I continue to think there is a good chance that by year end there will be an absence of war.

AND SPEAKING OF ISLAM. Since September 11, I have, like a lot of Americans, read a great deal about the Islamic faith and the people who practice it, always pondering the grand philosophical question, “What is up with these people?”

One observation I would make about the many articles I have read is that most of those that contain any criticism whatsoever of the Muslim world are loaded with assertions that the author is only talking about “some Muslims” and “some interpretations of the faith,” and that the “great majority” of Muslims everywhere are “really, just wonderful people.” “Really!”

Now that may well be true. I don’t know. I don’t know “most Muslims everywhere.” But I do know that that kind of mish-mash in a story usually indicates that the author is operating under some sort of constraint, whether self-imposed or under pressure from an editorial department staffed with politically correct, ideologically-addled, air-headed graduates from the English department at Duke.

So, I found it refreshing recently to read an article in the distinguished monthly “City Journal” that pulled no punches in addressing my question, “What’s up with these people?” and contained no apologies for candor. The article, entitled, “Why the Muslims Misjudged Us,” is too long to

reprint here, but the following quotes should whet your appetite. If so, you can find it at: www.city-journal.org in the “Winter” issue.

The catastrophe of the Muslim world is also explicable in its failure to grasp the nature of Western success, which springs neither from luck nor resources, genes nor geography. Like third-world Marxists of the 1960s, who put blame for their own self-inflicted misery upon corporations, colonialism, and racism—anything other than the absence of real markets and a free society—the Islamic intelligentsia recognizes the Muslim world’s inferiority vis-à-vis the West, but it then seeks to fault others for its own self-created fiasco. Government spokesmen in the Middle East should ignore the nonsense of the cultural relativists and discredited Marxists and have the courage to say that they are poor because their populations are nearly half illiterate, that their governments are not free, that their economies are not open, and that their fundamentalists impede scientific inquiry, unpopular expression, and cultural exchange.

Tragically, the immediate prospects for improvement are dismal, inasmuch as the war against terrorism has further isolated the Middle East. Travel, foreign education, and academic exchanges—the only sources of future hope for the Arab world—have screeched to a halt. All the conferences in Cairo about Western bias and media distortion cannot hide this self-inflicted catastrophe—and the growing ostracism and suspicion of Middle Easterners in the West.

But blaming the West, and Israel, for the unendurable reality is easier for millions of Muslims than admitting the truth. Billions of barrels of oil, large populations, the Suez Canal, the fertility of the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates valleys, invaluable geopolitical locations, and a host of other natural advantages that helped create wealthy civilizations in the past now yield an excess of misery, rather than the riches of resource-poor Hong Kong or Switzerland. How could it be otherwise, when it takes bribes and decades to obtain a building permit in Cairo; when habeas corpus is a cruel joke in Baghdad; and when Saudi Arabia turns out more graduates in Islamic studies than in medicine or engineering?

To tackle illiteracy, gratuitous state-sanctioned killing, and the economic sclerosis that comes from corruption and state control would require the courage and self-examination of Eastern Europe, Russia, South America, even of China. Instead, wedded to the old bromides that the West causes their misery, that fundamentalist Islam and crackpot mullahs have had no role in their disasters, that the subjugation of women is a “different” rather than a foul (and economically foolish) custom, Muslim intellectuals have railed these past few months about the creation of Israel half a century ago, and they have sat either silent or amused while the mob in their streets chants in praise of a mass murderer. Meanwhile millions of Muslims tragically stay sick and hungry in silence. . . .

For all the frothing, it seems that millions of our purported enemies wish to visit, study, or (better yet) live in the United States—and this is true not just of Westernized professors or globe-trotting tycoons but of hijackers, terrorists, the

children of the Taliban, the offspring of Iranian mullahs, and the spoiled teenage brats of our Gulf critics. The terrorists visited lap dancers, took out frequent-flier miles, spent hours on the Internet, had cell phones strapped to their hips, and hobnobbed in Las Vegas—parasitic on a culture not their own, fascinated with toys they could not make, and always ashamed that their lusts grew more than they could be satisfied. Until September 11, their ilk had been like fleas on a lazy, plump dog, gnashing their tiny proboscises to gain bloody nourishment or inflict small welts on a distracted host who found them not worth the scratch

Americans find this Middle Eastern cultural schizophrenia maddening, especially in its inability to fathom that all the things that Muslim visitors profess to hate—equality of the sexes, cultural freedom, religious tolerance, egalitarianism, free speech, and secular rationalism—are precisely what give us the material things that they want in the first place. CDs and sexy bare midriffs are the fruits of a society that values freedom, unchecked inquiry, and individual expression more than the dictates of state or church; wild freedom and wild materialism are part of the American character. So bewildered Americans now ask themselves: Why do so many of these anti-Americans, who profess hatred of the West and reverence for the purity of an energized Islam or a fiery Palestine, enroll in Chico State or UCLA instead of madrassas in Pakistan or military academies in Iraq?

The embarrassing answer would explain nearly everything, from bin Ladin to the intifada. Dads and moms who watch al-Jazeera and scream in the street at the Great Satan really would prefer that their children have dollars, an annual CAT scan, a good lawyer, air conditioning, and Levis in American hell than be without toilet paper, suffer from intestinal parasites, deal with the secret police, and squint with uncorrected vision in the Islamic paradise of Cairo, Teheran, and Gaza. . . .

BOOKS YOU SHOULDN'T READ. Back when I was gainfully employed by a respectable brokerage, I used to occasionally write pieces recommending a book, or list of books, that I particularly liked. So this week, just for fun, I thought I would comment on a book that I think readers should avoid.

I should admit immediately that I have not read this book myself. And won't. But I did read a review of it, and it reminded me of the time years ago that the "Book-of-the-Month Club" sent me a copy of Geraldine Ferraro's autobiography by mistake and I sent it back with a note that said: "Not only did I not order this book, but I did not sleep well last night knowing it was in my house." (Ms. Ferraro is, by the way, for you younger readers, a dreadful woman who once ran for Vice-President on the ticket with . . . a . . . a . . . a . . . well . . . old what's his name . . . you know . . . a you can look it up.)

Anyway, the book I recommend that you not read is entitled *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, published by Random House and written by a fellow named Strobe Talbott. Now Strobe Talbott is, if you will allow me a little editorial license here, a dope, which isn't so bad in and of itself, but he has been spreading his dopey ideas for years from a great

many influential pulpits, and like the energizer bunny, he just doesn't stop. Thus, my admonition: "Don't buy this book! Don't even steal it!"

He is an old "Friend of Bill's," going way back to Bill's days as a "scholar" in England. Most recently, he was Deputy Secretary of State for seven years in the Clinton administration, never gaining "the big job" because the Congressional leadership made it very clear from the start that the Senate would never approve him as Secretary of State.

Prior to joining his pal Bill's State Department, Strobe's foreign policy experience consisted of having been a reporter at *Time Magazine* for many years, during which time his most distinguishing characteristics were a penchant for covering the Soviet Union with great affection, like a sports writer covers the local baseball team; opposition to the U.S. Cold War military buildup on the theory that this would just antagonize the Soviets; and a persistent bias against Israel. I offer the following quotes from him, which I have collected over the years, as support for my position that you might to avoid this tome.

In 1981 when President Reagan told Notre Dame graduates that the West should dismiss Communism "as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written," Talbott wrote that he agreed with "other administration officials, especially professional diplomats and intelligence analysis with long experience in Soviet affairs [who] . . . expressed confidence that the Soviets recognized such theorizing for what it was: idiosyncratic, extremist, and very much confined to the fringes of government."

He noted also that "though some second-echelon hardliners in the Reagan Administration . . . espouse the early fifties goal of rolling back Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, the U.S. simply does not have the military or political power to do that."

In 1982, when Reagan told the British parliament that "this century is to witness the gradual growth of freedom and democratic ideals" and argued that "the Soviet Union itself is not immune to this reality," Talbott insisted that "very few in the West took it seriously as a statement of policy."

In 1983, Talbott criticized Reagan's view that the Soviet Union must build down its missile inventory "to a position that the United States would recognize as equality." Talbott called this "a transparently one-sided set of objectives." In January 1990, he wrote *Time's* essay crowning Gorbachev "Man of the Decade," in which he argued that "the doves in the great debate of the past 40 years were right all along." The Soviet threat, he said, "never was."

As I said earlier, Talbott was, throughout the Cold War, a harsh and unrelenting critic of Israel, for the most part echoing the Soviet Union's charges against the Jewish state. He once accused Menachem Begin of being "obsessed with the Holocaust." In 1981, when Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor, Talbott wrote an essay in *Time* calling Israel "a nasty, and bitter nation." During his confirmation

hearing for number two post at State, Talbott asserted that his views on Israel had changed.

I looked this book up on Amazon.com, and in that place labeled “Customers who bought this book also bought,” it listed the following books.

The Misunderstood Stalin, by Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria; *A Fun Look at Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* by Alger Hiss; and *Documented Cases of Space Aliens Who Have Landed in New Jersey, With Exclusive Interviews*, by Billy Bob Jones (All right! I’m kidding. The book won’t go on the sale until May 21.)

CLINTON WATCH: LIFE IMITATES ART. Regular readers of mine are aware that I read a lot, and that I tend to read what would be widely regarded as serious books about serious subjects. What most readers probably don’t know is that I am also a connoisseur of fine, classical music, meaning that I like the old country singers like Jimmie Rogers (“The Singing Brakeman”), Hank Williams, Earnest Tubb, Patsy Kline, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, and George Jones.

Being somewhat stuck in my ways, it is tough for me to add anything new to my list of favorites, but in the past few years I have really enjoyed a group called the “Confederate Railroad.” Now they have a relatively new CD out with some terrific songs on it, among which is a great favorite of mine, entitled “White Trash with Money,” the gist of which is, “Well I might have been born just poor white trash, but I sold a million records and made a little cash. The doctors and lawyers don’t think it’s funny, that they’re living next door to white trash with money.” At the end of this classy little number, the singer asks his wife if he might put some pink flamingos on their front yard.

I mention this song this week because of the following item that appeared in the April 29 issue of one of my all-time favorite weekly newspaper, *Human Events*, the paper that Ronald Reagan loved also. It goes as follows, and I am not making this up, by the way.

Think Pink: Hillary and Bill recently visited the “Pots and Pans Nursery” in Austin, Tex., which is a famous garden and greenhouse. While there, they bought two pairs of the famed plastic pink flamingo flock that decorates the nursery’s hillside. The couple was in town for the wedding of one of Chelsea’s childhood friends, and afterward they attended a reception at the home of a prominent Texas democratic fundraiser. Also during their stay, Hillary spoke at a University of Texas Law School event. But the question remains: What could the Clintons possibly want with four plastic flamingos? The owner of the store guesses that they’re for the lawn of their \$1.7 million Chappaqua home.

“Now the doctors and the lawyers [in Chappaqua] don’t think it’s funny that they’re . . .” Well, you know the rest.