

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

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THEY SAID IT

“If colonialism was a crime, the greatest offence was in its undoing when fragile native cultures, embryonic modern societies, and minority peoples ill-provided to protect themselves, were everywhere abandoned into the hands of political leaders equipped with the powerful machine of the modern state.”

Coup e’Etat, Preface to the 1979 edition. By my old friend,
Edward Luttwak

“THE VISION THING” IS BACK. Like a lot of people all over the world, I have watched with interest the debate within and around the Bush administration over whether and when the United States should invade Iraq. It is a fascinating exercise, made more so by the fact that Saddam Hussein, who, one might say, has some stake in the outcome, is, for all practical purposes, incidental to the discourse, like a prisoner sitting in the dock while hosts of lawyers engage in an extended debate over whether the death penalty is appropriate for him.

Saddam is, of course, not as defenseless as the aforementioned prisoner. He is, presumably, making preparations in case the argument should not go his way. Yet, there is surprisingly little knowledge about what in fact he is doing in advance of the coming conflagration, or how he feels about the whole thing.

Some observers fear that he will, when the fighting begins, launch a massive, suicidal nuclear, chemical, or biological assault on Israel, in hopes of throwing the entire region, if not the world, into a bloody chaotic tribute to his life and death. I am beginning to wonder if he isn’t in the process of cutting some deal with Russia in an attempt to protect his life, his ego, and his oil. Saddam doesn’t impress me as the type who seeks martyrdom. We’ll see.

But the most interesting aspect of the debate, I think, is how parochial and circular it is. I keep wondering how the administration and the news hounds can keep this ball in the air day in and day

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

out with no new information and no new ideas coming forth to energize the participants and keep the public interested.

Bush wants to attack. It looks like he has the support of a reasonably strong bi-partisan majority in Congress. The public appears amenable. Much of the rest of the world, including most if not all of Europe, is against it. What's to know? Yet the debate goes on and on with the same tired arguments being made by the same tired people, over and over. And wonder of wonders, no one ever seems to change his or her mind as a result of this incessant bloviating. Yet Bush pushes on, beating this dead horse time and again. I find myself wondering why he doesn't just shut up and do it.

The more I watch this weird exercise the more I come to believe that the problem Bush has is the same one his father had. He lacks "the vision thing." He seems incapable of placing this proposed attack on Iraq in any sort of grand strategic context, or worldview. This weakens his argument. And it makes even those of us who support his position nervous.

If the sole purpose of the attack is preemptive defense, then is Iran next? Is North Korea? If not, why not? Why are these countries different? Are they not "evil" regimes? Will other nations with "weapons of mass destruction" be targeted if they rattle their swords at the United States? How about China? And if not, why not? What makes Iraq different?

And what about Afghanistan? How does that tie in? What is the United States still doing there? Is it "nation building?" Why not just go home, leave these people to the misery they seem so richly to deserve, and attack again if it becomes necessary based on the strategy of preemption? Or is the real estate strategically important? If the purpose is nation building is that what the United States will do in Iraq when Saddam is ousted? Will a permanent U.S. military base be established there? Will America spend billions of dollars rebuilding what will be destroyed, and to finance an attempt at establishing a "democracy" in that God-forsaken nation of uneducated political primitives? What is the policy, plan, or philosophy behind all of this? Is there one?

I think a case can be made that the reason the United States seems to be losing friends throughout the world, is that its political leaders have, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, been incapable of formulating a coherent vision of America's role in the post cold war period and explaining it to the world. This leaves the task to its enemies, who are merrily taking up the challenge, impugning America's motives, its desires, its intentions, and its charity, and accusing it of imperialism, bullyism, racism, and whatever other "ism" happens to be popular at the time.

From just after the end of World War II until the fall of the Berlin Wall, U.S. foreign policy was directed almost exclusively toward the task of containing and combating the spread of communism. Virtually everything that the United States did outside its borders, including foreign aid, was done with an eye on this goal. Everyone knew this and could judge accordingly whether the task was being pursued and accomplished in an orderly and sensible fashion.

With the fall of the Soviet Union a new vision of America's role in the world was sorely needed. But the first President Bush and his foreign policy gurus were not up to the task. Complaints about this shortcoming were disdainfully referred to by Bush as "the vision thing."

Bill and Hillary Clinton, along with the Carter castoffs and intellectual lightweights they brought with them to run foreign policy, were even less capable than the Bush crowd of formulating a

comprehensive, understandable worldview. In fact, as far as “the vision thing” went, Bill and Hillary made President Bush look like Joan of Arc.

Early in his administration, it looked as though Bill’s foreign policy was governed by a tendency to simply go with the flow, or as my old friend Dan Pipes, who runs the Middle East Institute, put it at the time, to “rely heavily on advice and direction from whatever special interest group is most vocal about a particular decision.”

Pipes pointed out back then, (and I reported in a September 21, 1994 article entitled “In Search of a Clinton Foreign Policy Theme”) that Clinton relied on the American Jewish community for advice on his treatment of Israel, on one faction of the Florida Cuban community for guidance on his treatment of Castro, and on the Black Caucus for his approach to Haiti. On trade matters, Pipes noted, Clinton sought advice about Japan from those who trade with Japan, about China from those who trade with China, and about NAFTA from those who trade with Mexico. Early glimmers of what appeared to be ideologically-based concerns over China's human rights policy and NAFTA's impact on U.S. labor were quickly abandoned in favor of more "practical" considerations, as articulated by affected members of the U.S. business community.

Early in Clinton’s presidency there was nothing particularly wrong with this ad hoc approach. But as time went on and the issues became more complicated, the administration’s lack of an overarching view of America’s role in the world began to get Bill in trouble in such places as Somalia and what was then called Yugoslavia. A few years later, when the consequences of Clinton’s hobby of houghmagandy began to become manifest, he turned his foreign policy into a nightmarish display of illicit, illegal, unethical and immoral acts ranging from crooked fundraising activities in Asia to launching Monica missiles on aspirin factories in Africa.

And this brings us to today, almost 13 years after the end of the Cold War, and the global *raison d’être* of the most powerful and influential nation the world has ever known is still being defined by its enemies and detractors, rather than by its own leaders.

How should the United States employ its energies in this new world? Does the nation have a moral obligation to proselytize democracy throughout the globe? Should the United States become the world's policeman? How much force should be used if the decision is reached to police the world, and on which "beats" should the policemen concentrate? Indeed, what behavior by a foreign government is so unacceptable that it will spark U.S. action?

Or, should America "come home," tend to its own problems, react only when its "national interests" are threatened? And if this policy is adopted, what exactly qualifies as the nation’s "national interests?"

Should the United States pursue a policy of what used to be called “narrow nationalism,” or adapt a modern form of Wilsonianism, which endorsed the idea that it would be possible to create a "world community" in which nations would subordinate national interests to the sovereignty of international law?

More specifically, is America practicing “cultural imperialism” on behalf of its giant, money-grubbing factories of sensate capitalism, as some people charge? Is it so bent on proselytizing “democracy” around the globe that it will employ the sword to do so? Have its Christian roots become so thirsty for converts that it cannot tolerate the growth of Islam? Is America’s Jewish community so politically powerful that it has hijacked U.S. foreign policy on behalf of Israel? Does America just want to control all the oil in the world? Or is it like a big, stupid overly friendly dog that has no idea the havoc it is wreaking with it’s attempts to lick everyone’s face?

I think it would help if the President of the United States were to take a stab at answering these and similar questions. This should not be done in a series of unrelated sound bites spouted forth over a period of several years during stops in various foreign venues, but in a comprehensive way so people around the world could understand what America’s President thinks about America’s role in the world, so they can judge America’s actions against this standard instead of against charges put forth by disgruntled socialist politicians in France, rabble rousing, fanatical Arab terrorists in the Middle East, or radical “environmentalists” in San Francisco.

I would argue that it should be addressed in a comprehensive way so that Americans themselves will know exactly where their leader thinks he is leading them.

And most importantly, I think it should be addressed in a comprehensive way so that individuals within the President’s own administration will follow rather than try to lead. One of the dangers Bush runs, as did Bill Clinton and Bush’s father before him, is that others within his administration will provide the answers to these questions if he chooses not to answer them himself. In fact, I think a case could be made that that is exactly what is happening today.

Now I would not presume to offer a worldview on Bush’s behalf. At least not this week. But I will close with a few thoughts on the subject.

For starters, Bush should take the task seriously. There are grave dangers involved in focusing solely on America’s parochial interests. But there are dangers too in trying to solve all the world’s problems, to right all wrongs, to punish all criminals. There are grave dangers involved in failing to recognize that the United States has certain responsibilities to other weaker and more vulnerable nations. But there are dangers too in operating on the assumption, as Wilson did, that America has some sort of grand, noble mission ordained by God.

It seems to me Bush demonstrated that he had some understanding of the balance necessary here when in his inaugural address he used the phrase “purpose without arrogance.” He could build on that by incorporating Burke’s understanding that government is a “practical thing, made for the happiness of mankind, and not to furnish out a spectacle of uniformity to gratify the schemes of visionary politicians.”

And he might study St. Augustine’s complaint in the *City of God* against Virgil’s assertion in Anchises’ speech to his son Aeneas that Rome had a divinely ordained role.

But, Rome, ‘t is thine alone, with awful sway,
To rule mankind, and make the world obey,

Disposing peace and war by thy own majestic way;
To tame the proud, the fetter'd slave to free:
These are imperial arts, and worthy thee.

Stated simply, Augustine allowed as how Rome should not confuse the things of Caesar with the things of God. Or as my friend Claes Ryn once put it, it is dangerous to “exaggerate the moral potential of politics,” the “collective political redemption of mankind” being neither a feasible nor even a desirable goal of government.

Bush could do these and a variety of other things in preparation for developing an understandable worldview. Or he could just continue to muddle through like his father and Bill Clinton did.

WHILE 6 MILLION STARVE. One time, many years ago, a client asked me how I kept my sense of humor living and working in Washington and covering politics. I said that humor was the only way of remaining reasonably sane in such an environment. I thought about this conversation last week while reading an editorial in the *Washington Post* that was so outrageously stupid that the only way to keep from sinking into despair was to laugh.

The editorial had to do with problems in Zimbabwe that are being caused, or severely aggravated, by Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe’s seizure of the lands of 2,900 white farmers in that nation, which is known as the “bread basket” of southern Africa. I won’t try to outline these problems myself, but will simply run a few paragraphs from two news articles on the subject. The first, from the August 19 *Washington Post*, is entitled: “Zimbabwe Rounding Up White Farmers.”

Typically one of the continent’s main exporters of grains, the country is one of six southern African countries facing severe food shortages caused by drought, mismanagement and disruption in farm activity as a result of Zimbabwe’s political violence. The U.N. World Food Program estimates that as many as 6 million Zimbabweans face starvation if they do not receive food aid soon.

With a planting season approaching, the forced removal of the farmers and more than 70,000 experienced farm workers has raised fears of irreversible harm to the country. Many of the seized farms have gone to government officials and army commanders who have little or no experience in commercial farming. Peasants resettled on the land have been given none of the equipment, seeds, training or loans required to farm vast plots of land.

The second story, from the August 22 *Washington Times*, is entitled: “Mrs. Mugabe joins Zimbabwe land grab.”

Grace Mugabe turned up last week at John and Eva Matthews’ farm north of Harare one of at least 190 white-owned farms that are being handed over to relatives and close associates of President Robert Mugabe.

“I’m taking over this farm,” declared the president’s wife, surrounded by a coterie of government officials, senior army officers and young thugs from her husband’s ruling party — the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, or ZANU-PF.

“We asked her what would happen to us,” said one black farm worker, whose identity cannot be revealed for safety reasons. “She replied: ‘Go and live by the river over there.’”

To press home the point, the police arrested 78-year-old Mr. Matthews on Saturday. “I was told I had 48 hours to get off the farm and if they found me here after that they would lock me up straight away,” Mr. Matthews said as he loaded his furniture onto the back of a truck. . .

It is understood that Mrs. Mugabe intends to settle her relatives on the farm. Mr. Mugabe’s land redistribution policy was meant to deliver white-owned farms into the hands of millions of landless blacks, but many of the choice properties are going instead to his friends and relatives.

A list, by no means exhaustive, has been compiled by *The Washington Times* from information provided by the Commercial Farmers Union and the Ministry of Lands and Agriculture, among other sources.

It shows that at least 190 senior politicians, businessmen and members of the armed forces close to Mr. Mugabe have been allocated farms. Many have been given several farms; one senior member of ZANU-PF party has been allocated seven.

Among the beneficiaries are two of Mr. Mugabe’s sisters, his brother-in-law and his wife’s nephew. Zimbabwe’s two vice presidents, Joseph Msika and Simon Muzenda, have both been rewarded, the latter with two farms. . . .

Since February 2000, ZANU-PF youths, describing themselves as veterans from the 1970s struggle against minority rule, have violently enforced Mr. Mugabe’s land-reform policies, killing 12 white farmers and many more of their black farm workers.

Setting fire to more than 10 million acres of crops and preventing cultivation on much of the rest of the farmland, they have precipitated a famine that threatens 6 million Zimbabweans, half the country’s population, with starvation, aid workers say.

Up to 300,000 black farm workers have been rendered homeless. According to pro-democracy groups, at least 30 percent of the white-owned farms were allocated to senior government officials and businessmen connected to the president.

An additional 40 percent, originally given to landless blacks, have in the past few months been turned to Mugabe cronies.

Now, here's what the *Washington Post* said about this situation in an editorial entitled, "Zero Hour in Zimbabwe." Get ready to laugh, or cry, whichever.

. . . . Robert Mugabe was once a hero [to whom the *Post* did not say], leading his country's struggle for independence. Today [presumably after undergoing some sort of radical moral metamorphosis] he stands as a representative of all that is wrong with postcolonial African leadership: a self-centered, power-hungry dictator who has lost the support of his people, yet clings to the trappings of office through the help of the mob, the gun and a demagogic political appeal to the worst kind of human emotions. *Zimbabwe would do well to be rid of him.* (Emphasis added.)

Well yes, of course. Ain't it the truth. Next week, I understand the *Post* is planning an editorial that will say that Iraq would "do well to be rid of Saddam."

Not to be outdone by the *Washington Post's* aggressive posture, the folks over at the Bush State Department "denounced" Mugabe and announced plans to "isolate" him "internationally." One would hope that they are also making plans to feed 6 million people. As part of their "worldview," of course.

SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA. I admit that I have not focused much attention on the upcoming congressional and gubernatorial elections. It is, I believe, a little early yet. But I must say that I think the California governor's race is becoming interesting. Last week, the mainstream press had a field day reporting about the "awkwardness" that President Bush encountered in California while trying to raise money for the "faltering" gubernatorial campaign of Bill Simon in the midst of the Simon's "ethical problems."

According to the press, California Democrats have "capitalized" on Simon's ethical difficulties, betting on the probability that California voters won't have anything to do with anyone who is even remotely involved in a corporate scandal, in light of the recent events. Makes sense, thought I. And then I read an editorial in the *Sacramento Bee* with the headline "Hold your nose, California, Davis fund-raising fails the smell test." Now I'm not so sure. Excerpts follow:

Phew! Smell that? Wow, something sure stinks down on Capitol Avenue. Has somebody moved a rendering plant next door to the Capitol?

Oh, never mind. It's nothing like that. It's nothing at all, really. Just the latest round of Gov. Gray Davis' campaign fund-raising. It's surprising we can even catch a whiff of it. Davis has been wringing money from everybody who has anything to do with state government for so long that you'd think everybody's nasal receptors would be burned out by now. But, jeeze, things are smelling even worse than usual these days. . . .

The paper then outlined several specific cases of odiferous activities on the part of Davis and his cronies, and closed with this:

The governor's various spokesmen say there's nothing wrong with any of this. They say everybody has always done it. Davis has strict policies that prevent any improprieties, they

say. Not only that, they keep saying that the governor's fund-raising tactics aren't a real issue, and that voters just don't care about campaign finance. Who knows? Maybe they're right. But, boy, the stink is getting really bad. And it's still more than two months until election day.

YOUR TAX DOLLARS AT WORK. This according to an article by Alexander Bolton in the August 14 issue of *The Hill*, a weekly newspaper that covers Congress like a blanket.

Senate Democrats are steering hundreds of millions of dollars in federal spending to states represented by eight of their most vulnerable lawmakers. The aid, in the form of community development block grants, airport facility grants, water project funding and other types of federal assistance, is aimed at helping the political fortunes of vulnerable senators seeking reelection this year.

For example, the Senate version of the Housing and Urban Development funding bill sets aside \$31.1 million in grants for Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey and South Dakota. The biggest winner is Missouri, represented by freshman Sen. Jean Carnahan (D), which could benefit from \$7.7 million in grants. All eight states are represented by vulnerable Democrats. . . .

A list compiled by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) shows that the Senate military construction spending contains \$108.5 million in pork projects for Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, Missouri, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey and South Dakota. . . .

The energy and water-spending bill provides \$105 million more than the president's budget for Army Corps of Engineers construction projects in the states of vulnerable Democratic lawmakers. . . Louisiana, represented by Sen. Mary Landrieu (D), would receive \$60.8 million more than the president requested for Army Corps of Engineers projects. Sen. Max Baucus' (D-Mont.) home state would benefit from \$11.5 million for unrequested projects. . . .

The Transportation Subcommittee of the Appropriations panel, chaired by Sen. Patty Murray (Wash.), who also heads the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, contains 44 discretionary grants for airports in the states of endangered Democrats. . . .

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