

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

*Could great men thunder
As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet,
For every pelting petty officer
Would use his heaven for thunder,
Nothing but thunder. Merciful Heaven,
Thou rather, with thy sharp and sulphurous bolt,
Splits the unwedgeable and gnarled oak
Than the soft myrtle. But man, proud man,
Dress'd in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,
Would all themselves laugh mortal.*

Measure for Measure, William Shakespeare

MORE OF MELCHER'S EXCITING ELECTION COVERAGE. It would certainly not be accurate to say that tomorrow's elections are unimportant. On the other hand, I would be hard pressed to write a lengthy piece outlining all the momentous consequences of one outcome over another. Regardless of the results, President Bush is going to continue to put heat on Saddam and is likely to go to war with him; federal spending is going to continue to grow at breakneck speed, causing deficits to continue to rise; the government is going to continue to get larger and more intrusive; terrorism is going to be a big deal for a very long time; etc., etc., etc. This is no secret, of course. In fact, it is this realization that will be responsible for the low voter turnout that is certain to mark tomorrow's election day.

As I think about the election, I find that I care about the outcome for two reasons. The first is that I would like to see President Bush pack the courts of the land with young conservatives, and the only chance he has of doing this is to have a Republican majority in the Senate. The second is because they are *my team*, like the Redskins used to be years ago.

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It is worth noting that the Redskins were not *my team* for any rational reason. I knew no one associated with the organization; I didn't live in Washington; and I had no financial stake in the team's success. But they were *my team*, nevertheless, and I used to get excited when Sonny would pull a game out at the last minute with a series of amazing passes to Jerry Smith and Charlie Taylor, or a few years later, when Riggo would break loose for a long touchdown run.

My feelings toward Republicans are similar. They are *my team*, even though I know none of them personally, no longer live near Washington, and have no financial stake in their success. Some might argue with this latter contention, but I think, given my age, my current income, and the GOP's virtual abandonment of even a pretense of fiscal responsibility, it makes little difference to me financially whether they win or lose.

There is a subtle difference though between the nature of my former fondness for the Redskins and my support for the GOP. I used to *really* like the Redskins. The games were more fun when they played a team like the Cowboys, who I *really* didn't like, but I pulled for the Redskins no matter who they were playing. In the case of the Republicans, I really don't care much for any of them. They are, for the most part, a pretty sorry lot. I root for them mostly because I dislike so many of the Democrats so much that I can't stand the thought of seeing them win.

I am aware that this somewhat cavalier attitude on my part is a luxury afforded me by the fact that the Republicans have enough seats in both the House and the Senate to assure that the Democrats couldn't do too much damage even if they controlled both bodies. Should they regain large majorities in both houses though, and actually had a chance of thrusting their destructive beliefs wholesale on the nation, I would, I am certain, become much more concerned about the welfare of the Grand Old Party.

I will vote tomorrow, of course. But in many respects, I don't care much for mid-term elections. I often find them to be, shall I say, uncomfortable. For example, I like Minnesota. I grew up in northern Iowa and always thought Minnesota was a beautiful place filled with great people. So being reminded that half of the population of that great state thinks that Fritz Mondale, a major league political loser, should be back in the Senate is like finding a leather whip, men's-size spike-heeled shoes, and a pair of "full figure" black panty hose in my hunting buddy's closet. It's the kind of thing you just don't want to know.

On the other hand, mid-term elections do offer a seemingly endless array of priceless insights. I love, for example, the problem that some Democrats are having dealing with Bill Clinton's legacy. Bill's former chief of staff Erskine Bowles, for one, is desperately trying to distance himself from his former boss in his race against Mrs. Dole, rightfully fearing that too much attention to this association will raise questions about his own sleazy past.

And Bill McBride, who is trailing Jeb Bush in the governor's race in Florida, faced a true Hobson's choice, needing Bill's help to turn out the black vote, but knowing that having an adulterous rake making a personal visit would hurt him with the white Baptists in the panhandle, whose votes he must also have. His first choice was to have Bill call black ministers all over the state urging them to get their congregations out to vote. But last week, when it became clear that this would not be enough, McBride bit the bullet and had "the honorable brother," as Rep.,

Carrie Meek called him, come in and personally stump the black neighborhoods of Miami and Fort Lauderdale. The whole thing reminded me of when we were kids and Les Falk used to borrow Tommy McBee's football but wouldn't let him play because he said he didn't like him.

Finally, there was Bill Clinton standing side-by-side with California Governor Gray Davis, each mired in corruption and each declaiming the other's virtues. At the same time, Davis' political adviser, Garry South, is defending Davis against accusations from a guy named Mark Nathanson that Davis was involved with him in some crooked kickback deals having to do with the California Coastal Commission. So South says, "The governor is not going to have an argument with a convicted felon and admitted perjurer." To which the *Washington Times* asks, "Doesn't South know that his boss is campaigning with one?"

Anyway, my prediction about the election tomorrow is that the Republicans will pick up a few seats in the House and retake control of the Senate. Last January, in a forecast piece I wrote for Lehman, I predicted that the GOP would pick up eight seats in the House and four in the Senate. As I said in late September, I now think those numbers are too optimistic. But I think I have the trend right. We'll see.

And when it is over, we can get back to the important stuff. Like . . . oh gee . . . I dunno . . . like maybe whether Bill Clinton's big bulbous nose is gonna explode someday. Or collapse, as the case may be. Or whether Terry McAuliffe will end up in an orange jump suit where he belongs, making little rocks out of big ones.

AND THE MORAL OF AOL-TIME-WARNER STORY IS . . . I was distressed to read last week that AOL-Time-Warner chief Steve Case is thinking about spinning off the AOL division. I wasn't unhappy because I own the company, or have any financial ties to it. It was because I fear that such a breakup would place a great spiritual strain on America.

You see, I remember so well that when the deal was announced the big shots at both firms announced that the merger had a strong moral dimension. Case said it would "change the world," that together these firms had "an unbelievable opportunity to really make a difference, not just in terms of the services people use but also in terms of the kind of impact we can have on society." Not to be outdone, Time-Warner Chairman Gerald Levin announced that the merger was "about making a better world for people because we now have the technology and the instruments to do that."

I remember writing when all this happened that I was "ecstatic" about the whole thing. I said that I figured it was "just a matter of time . . . before the new firm would make a tender offer for the Episcopalians, and then there truly would be peace in the valley as the Carter family used to predict in song."

There was, I admit, a bit of sarcasm in that piece. You see, I had to point out that Time-Warner was one of the nation's most prolific peddlers of smut, having "a penchant for dirty movies and records glorifying such things as brutal rape and cop killing, the kind of thing that some kids today have learned to appreciate under the tutelage of the modern 'entertainment industry.'"

But I marched on, saying that it was possible that the new AOL-Time-Warner would, in fact, “make the world a better place by fighting social ills,” as the Reuter Business wire put it in the story from which the above Case and Levin quotes were taken. It is possible, I said, that Time-Warner would stop making and selling dirty movies and records that glorify violence, and that AOL would close those “chat rooms” that have become one of the principle cyber meeting places for the nation’s perverts.

I never thought much about the fact that the deal wouldn’t work out. But now that I know it is not doing so well, I thought I would offer the moral of the story, as promised in the headline above. It is this.

When the snake oil salesman comes knocking on the door, it is all right if he tells Mama that his elixir will cure warts, hemorrhoids, dry skin, scabies, bad breath, boils, balding, hearing loss, tooth decay, sour stomach, sore feet, bad eyesight, jock itch, swelling and tenderness in the abdomen, gas, lazy eye, ear ache, chapping, body odor, and all sorts of sexual dysfunctions. But when he says it will make Pa go to church on Sunday, its time to get out the tar and feathers.

LEFT AND RIGHT WING DOVES. I have said numerous times over the past several months that I expect the United States to launch a military assault on Iraq reasonably soon after the elections. Each time I have said this I have also said that I would support such an action. My reasons for this are not complex.

For starters, I firmly believe that America is the target of a holy war, or *jihad*, launched by a large, deadly, well-financed, well-organized, international group of religious fanatics.

I also believe that President Bush was correct when he said that because of the sneaky and deadly nature of the weapons and tactics employed by this foe America “must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge.”

I am not a big fan of Bush’s argument that America must go to war with Iraq to make the world safe for the United Nations. But it seems to play well in Accra and Paris, so what the heck.

And finally, I think that the United States would have to be crazy to wait and see whether Saddam Hussein either intends to use his large stockpile of deadly biological and chemical weapons against the United States or give them to someone who will.

I am aware that there are folks on both the left and the right of the political spectrum who don’t agree with me. As for those on the left, I am truly disinterested in their sloganeering opposition. At its best, it is childish. (“I just believe in peace, man.”) At its worst, it is disingenuous and willfully distorted (“Thus we call on all Americans to RESIST the war and repression that has been loosed on the world by the Bush administration. It is unjust, immoral, and illegitimate.”)

On the other hand, I am fascinated by the opposition to Bush’s proposed attack on Iraq that is being made by a small, fringe group on the right, which is led by Pat Buchanan. I very much don’t agree with these people. In fact, in many ways I find them to be more intellectually impoverished than such foreign policy mavens as Jane Fonda, Barbra Streisand, and Ed Asner. Furthermore, I don’t think they will have any meaningful impact on the debate.

After all, Buchanan is basically a non-entity in the grand public policy debating society that dominates Washington's political culture. He had a seat at the table at one time, but he has proved to be a master at self-marginalization, with his habit of impugning the motives and patriotism of his political opponents, and his tiresome, Cassandra-like tendency to overplay the dire social and economic consequences that awaits the nation that ignores his forebodings.

Yet, as I said earlier, the fight that the Buchananites are waging is fascinating to me because it seems to represent something very new on the American political scene, something more akin to early 20th century Europe than 21st century America; namely the establishment of a small, right wing, extremely radical, break-away political faction, that has, for all practical purposes, abandoned all hope of working within one of the major parties and of having any meaningful impact on policy; striving instead, mostly by pamphleteering, to simply vent the anger and hone the prejudices of its members.

In this case the pamphleteering has taken the form of a new bi-weekly news magazine named *The American Conservative*, which appears to be dedicated almost solely to a campaign against Bush's proposal to go to war with Iraq, his doctrine of preemptive strike, and his recently announced foreign policy goal of "making the world not just safer but better."

Running true to form, Buchanan and his supporters have taken a perfectly legitimate concern, namely that the United States runs the danger of becoming too assertive in the use of its status as the sole remaining super power, and turned it into a vehement, nasty harangue, invoking vague threats of treacherous foreign influences and offering a whole range of apocalyptic consequences that they say will result if Bush doesn't come to his senses soon. Among these is the eventual decline and fall of the United States along the pattern of the Roman Empire.

Space does not allow me to elaborate on the feverish arguments that are made by this crowd in this magazine. Anyone interested in an in-depth exploration can check it out at www.amconmag.com. But I offer the following look at the first three issues just to give a flavor of the kind of splenetic rhetoric to expect.

The cover of the first issue features a cartoon of Uncle Sam with a giant flyswatter about to hit a tiny bee with Saddam's face. The picture touts a story by Eric Margolis entitled "Iraq Folly," which is characterized as follows: "Ignorant of Iraq, void of strategic vision, and viewing the Mideast through the neoconservative prism, Bush steers America toward a quagmire."

The same issue contains a piece by Buchanan himself, maintaining that "all of the 20th century empires . . . perished of wounds suffered in Great Wars," and direly insinuating that this will be America's fate "if Providence does not intrude" before we "launch an imperial war on Iraq."

What follows is the unfolding of some truly amazing apocalyptic scenario-spinning, including sentences such as this one: ". . . with Israel's generals blabbing about pre-positioned U.S. weapons and Bibi Netanyahu listing for Congressional committees all the Arab nations we must attack, Al Jazeera does not need shoe-leather reporting to let Islam know on whose behalf America has come to crush their armies and occupy their capitals."

The cover of the second issue features a long quote from an article entitled “The Case Against Preemptive War” by Paul Schroeder, which predicts that “Bush’s push for regime change in Iraq—even if it succeeds short-term—will strike a disastrous blow to America’s long-term security.”

This is but one of several such articles in this issue that predicts terrible consequences should America go to war with Iraq, including one by Nicholas von Hoffman and another by Taki Theodoracopulos, who seems to blame the whole idea on Bill Kristol, who not only isn’t in the Bush administration but, so far as I can tell, isn’t even popular with the Bush crowd.

Taki, by the way, is bankrolling the magazine. He is a multimillionaire playboy, conservative columnist, 63-year-old heir to a Greek shipping and textile fortune, who has made a name for himself by writing columns blasting political correctness, feminists and liberals generally. The announcement of his partnership with Buchanan made some people wonder what the two had in common, given Buchanan’s emphasis on “family values” and Taki’s incessant philandering, until someone recalled Taki’s recent attacks on Israel and his penchant for Jew baiting.

And finally, there is the third issue which features on its cover a campaign button reading “Make War Vote GOP,” and which contains several articles attacking Bush’s policy toward Iraq, including one by Andrew Bacevich entitled “Bush’s Grand Strategy.”

The method behind this amazingly disingenuous article is to badly misstate the foreign policy outline Bush presented last September (see the September 30, 2002 issue of this newsletter), and then to savage the misstated position. Hence we read, “the Bush administration no longer views force as the last resort; rather it considers military power to be America’s most effective instrument of statecraft,” a statement that cannot be supported by anything that anyone in the Bush administration has ever said or written. The consequence of this Bacevich says is that “we [meaning the United States] cannot rest easy, we cannot guarantee our freedom, or our prosperity until we have solved every problem everywhere, relying chiefly on armed force to do so.”

The sad thing about all of this, in my opinion, is that there is in fact a clear danger that the United States might take too great an advantage of its status as the world’s sole remaining super power, and attempt, at great cost to it and to the rest of the world, to become the “world’s policeman.” And there is also little question that there is a substantial contingent within the Republican foreign policy establishment to actually follow this path.

I have spoken against this possibility numerous times over the years, and I have no doubt that someday, probably in the not too distant future, someone of greater stature and intellectual integrity than Pat and Taki will turn this into a real foreign policy issue, divorced from the ongoing war against radical Islamists and America’s support for Israel. In the meantime, the rantings of the Buchanan crowd can, in my opinion, only serve to delay the beginning of a meaningful discussion that would be well worth having.

HOW HAVE WE LIVED SO LONG? The following comes from John McCaslin’s always-terrific “Inside the Beltway” column in the always-terrific *Washington Times*. McCaslin says it was sent to him by one Cricket Stewart, from Sumter, S.C. The author, he says, is unknown. I just couldn’t resist passing it along.

"Looking back, it's hard to believe that we have lived as long as we have. Our baby cribs were covered with bright colored lead-based paint, with slats of wood several inches apart. We had no child-proof latches on medicine bottles or cabinets. We learned what the word 'no' meant.

"When we rode our bikes, we had no helmets. We drank water from garden hoses, not expensive bottles. If a classmate or loved one passed away, we didn't have counselors or psychologists rushing in to aid us. We learned that death is imminent and part of life, and we coped with it.

"We would leave home in the morning and play all day; nobody was able to reach us. We played dodgeball and sometimes the ball would really hurt. We ate cupcakes, bread and butter, and drank soda, but we were never overweight.

"Little League had tryouts and not everyone made the team; those who didn't had to learn to deal with disappointment, also part of life. Some students failed and repeated a grade, not diagnosed as having a learning disability and prescribed drugs. Those generations produced some of the best risk takers and problem solvers the world has ever known. How have we lived so long?"

MORE HOW HAVE WE LIVED SO LONG? The following, which I think somehow fits with the above piece, comes from the November 1 edition of James Taranto's "Best of the Web Today."

At Cornell University (New York state, Gore by 24.98%), the Gannett student health center "is currently debating whether to sell vibrators in their dispensary," the Cornell Daily Sun reports:

"This comes out of many conversations between myself and people in the LGBT community about how to improve Gannett's services and make it more affirming of women's sexuality," Somjen Frazer '03 said, who is the main researcher for the Women's Health Initiative (WHI).

Through her research, Frazer works closely with Gannett to find ways to serve women whose health care "has been historically undeserved." . . . Many students feel it would be helpful for Gannett to have vibrators available because Cornell is located in Ithaca, not a major city. "At this point, you either go online or go downtown to the sort of scary and not very woman-affirming place sex-shop downtown," Frazer said.

Frazier adds that using a vibrator "can be a part of a holistic health approach."

END NOTES: Truth Comes In Foxy Packages. The *Washington Post* reports that Paul Begala, one of many strange little fellows who used to hang around Bill Clinton, broke bad the other day against Fox News' Rita Crosby for writing "Son of Sam" David Berkowitz a letter commending him for his "spiritual growth" since going to prison and stating that "the Lord calls on individuals at various times to serve Him and serve His people." Begala said on a CNN show

called “Cross Fire” that “it’s just not right to suggest that God wants a mass murderer to go on television.” And then he added, “Of course, God watches CNN anyway. He told me so today.” To which Crosby quipped, “It’s a good thing God watches CNN. Hardly anybody else does.”

Terry, We Hardly Knew Ya. Two weeks ago I said that one of the downsides if the GOP took control of the Senate would be that Terry McAuliffe might lose his job as Chairman of the Democratic Party. McAuliffe is, I said, “one of the greatest political assets the GOP has,” being both a political naïf and a constant reminder that his party is permeated with corruption from the top down. And lo, comes last week an item in the *Drudge Report* citing an unnamed “senior elected Democrat” saying that Terry “will be asked to step down . . . if Democrats lose control of the senate and fail to pick up seats in the house.”

Move Over Shakespeare. I haven’t read the Harry Potter books, although I think I would enjoy them if I did. I have always liked books of that genre. But it is clear that if the two bogus, knock-off books in the series, which have been written and published by Chinese copyright pirates, ever become available in English, they will go on my “must read” list. Why? Well, get this great passage from one of them that appeared in the *Washington Post*. It deserves a Pulitzer

“Harry is wondering in his bath how long it will take to wash away the mud from his face. To a grown-up, handsome young man, it is disgusting to be dirty. Lying in a luxurious bathtub and scrubbing his face with his hands, he thinks about Dudley’s face, which is as fat as Aunt Petunia’s bottom.”

Pregnant Phrases. I love this sentence from a *Washington Post* piece on the CIA’s “intelligence successes” since September 11. “An invaluable tool . . . is the practice in which U.S. Agencies transfer individuals arrested in one country to another allied country that is able to extract information from them and relay it to the United States.” YES!