

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

"History is one damn thing after another."

Variously attributed to Winston Churchill, Henry Ford, Harry Truman, H.A.L. Fisher, Robert Sherrill, and some fellow named Anonymous.

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"It is too early tell."

Supposedly said by Chou En-Lai when asked by any number of people (depending on who is telling the story) what he thought had been the impact of the French Revolution.

(Editors note: I have grown weary of late writing about the day-to-day machinations related to such matters as the pending war in Iraq, the "crisis" in North Korea, the Democratic presidential wannabes, the tax bill, affirmative action, terrorism, and whatnot. So I decided to do something different this week. When I began writing this piece, I had intended to expand its scope to include Europe, China and Russia. But after getting as far as I did, it occurred to me that you, gentle reader, had probably grown as weary of this speculative navel gazing as I have of the mundane, day-to-day Washington news stories. So I quit. In any case, I had fun writing it, and I hope you enjoy reading it.)

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON TODAY'S WORLD. In Wyndham Lewis's 1953 novel, *Self Condemned*, his central character, a history professor named Rene Harding, rejects the popular notion of history as a linear timeline of wars and civil massacres driven by one larger-than-life Carlylean hero after another. These types of events, he maintains, "should be treated as police court news." In *his* book, he presents history as a flowing stream of ideas and movements. This approach is described as follows.

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“The history of our century would not be one mainly of personalities (though, alas, they are there as ever). What we should see would be big, ideologic currents, gaudily coloured, converging, dissolving, combining or contending. It would look like a chart of the ocean rather than a Madame Tussaud's Waxworks; though there would be faces (one with a tooth-brush moustache), like labels of one or other of the big currents of ideas. Then there would be the mountainous blocks of all kinds, as though raised up by an earthquake: there would be the piling up of tremendous inventions, their instant conversion to highly unsuitable uses: the criminality of man rioting in the midst of these unnumbered gadgets. Then there would be the growth, in every society, of the huge canker of Debt. In more and more insane proportions, the Credit System would be apparent, developing its destructive bulk. One would sense nebulous spiders, at the heart of wider and wider webs of abstract simulacras of wealth, suspended over everything: hordes of men engaged for years in meaningless homicide: and vast social revolutions as the culmination of a century of plots, and propaganda of brotherly love at the point of a pistol, and *la haine creatrice* [created hatred]. So there would be arabesques of creation and of destruction, the personal factor unimportant, the incarnations of ideas, the gigantic coloured effigies of a Hitler or a Stalin, no more than the remains of monster advertisement.

I hadn't read nor even thought about this great Lewis classic for many years. And then, last week, while trying to decide what to write for this week's newsletter, it occurred to me that we are living in a Harding-like world today, a world in which history is being driven by “big currents of ideas;” “tremendous inventions” that are being “converted to highly unsuitable uses;” “huge cankers of debt;” and “vast social revolutions as the culmination of a century of plots.”

Sure, there are a few outsized personalities around, such as George W. Bush, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and the weak-eyed little doofus from North Korea. But this is quite clearly not an age of “great men.” Who runs France? Who runs Germany? Who runs Japan? Who cares? Who runs China? A weaselling technocrat about whom the world knows little. And he isn't running it anyway. He's riding a tiger. The important historic question has nothing to do with him. The question has to do with where the tiger is headed. The same applies to Comrade Putin.

There are no Alexanders, or Napoleons, or Hitlers, or even Lyndon Johnsons, who are driving history before them like a cheap mule, forcing change, shaping events according to some blueprint that only they can see and read. There is no “personality, concentrated in one point, dominating the entire world from horseback,” no “soul of the world,” whom it is “impossible not to admire,” as Hegel described “Emperor Napoleon” upon seeing him victoriously enter Jena, Germany on October 13, 1803.

With the exception of a handful of petty thugs who are destined for extinction, President Bush is as close to a major historic mover and shaker as there is in the world today. And the jury is still out as to whether he is actually shaking anything or being shaken himself.

This is an age of ideas not people. “Big, ideologic currents, gaudily coloured, converging, dissolving, combining or contending.” So, with this in mind, I thought it would be fun to take a brief look at the world from Harding's perspective.

The Mountainous Block Of Islam. For starters, militant Islam is on the rise worldwide, a mountainous block of created hatred, hordes of men engaged for years in meaningless homicide, converting tremendous inventions to highly unsuitable uses. Osama bin Laden isn't the earthquake that raised this upheaval. He is, as Lewis's Harding put it, nothing more than a "monster advertisement" for an upheaval that is bigger than any one man could create.

What we are witnessing is a monumental clash between two cultures, in a world that is growing too small to contain them both in harmony.

Militant Islam views western capitalism, with its emphasis on materialism, technological innovation, entrepreneurialism, tolerance of all faiths, a secular system of justice, and support for equality between the sexes, as contrary to the teachings of Muhammad, or to put it another way, fundamentally evil.

Militant Islam hates the fact that these "western" ideas have permeated Islamic culture, the bedrock of which is a cruel medieval legal system, abiding hostility toward other faiths, and the subjugation of women to the will of men. Like the ancient Spartans, Islamic societies have, throughout history, relied heavily on the removal of temptation, rather than moral discipline, to maintain the virtue of their citizens. So they fear that the siren appeal of the temporal, sensate pleasures of Western society will lure citizens away from strict adherence to the faith.

Militant Islam also hates the fact that enthusiasm for the "unnumbered gadgets" of Western materialism has spread throughout the world, making it ever more difficult to successfully recruit new adherents to the Islamic faith.

In my opinion, there is virtually no hope for a peaceful, negotiated resolution of this clash of cultures. One side will eventually have to adapt to the will of the other. And this adaptation will have to be forced. For unlike most of the great conflicts that have occupied historians since the days of Thucydides, this is not a clash of "great men on horseback," which will end when one is killed or quits the field like Darius III before the onslaught of Alexander's armies. In fact, there is no single individual, or group of individuals, in either camp, who would have the authority to negotiate a settlement on behalf of all the participants on his side, should the opportunity arise.

As the Israeli's have found, no Muslim, or group of Muslim's in the world, is in a position to guarantee that all other Muslims and groups of Muslims will renounce terrorism, no matter what consideration is offered in exchange for such a pledge. And not even President Bush could speak on behalf of the entire West in a negotiation that involved a pledge of complete non-interference in the affairs of all Islamic states. This is a hard concept for Americans to grasp. Wyndam Lewis' Professor Harding would have understood it perfectly.

The big, ideologic, gaudily coloured currents of American politics. Many years ago, back during those dark, modern times (as opposed to today's enlightened, post-modern times) when American colleges and universities used to offer history courses having to do with something called "Western Civilization," (on the now-outdated theory that educated people should know from whence came the ideas that helped mold the society in which they live) a popular bromide among the professors of this archaic and arcane subject used to be, "Tell me what you think about the French Revolution and I will tell you what you think about everything else."

In his once well-known 1941 essay, “Criticism In A Mass Society,” W. H. Auden said the following.

“The statement, ‘Man is a fallen creature with a natural bias to do evil,’ and the statement, ‘Men are good by nature and made bad by society,’ are both presuppositions, but it is not an academic question to which one we give assent. If, as I do, you assent to the first, your art and politics will be very different from what they will be if you assent, like Rousseau or Whiteman, to the second.”

These are, of course, two very different ways of saying exactly the same thing. In fact, each statement is an accurate representation of the big, ideologic, gaudily coloured epic struggle that has been raging throughout Western civilization for over 200 years now, and which has been the central factor in American politics since the 1960s.

Most Americans are only vaguely aware of this battle. But I would guess that future historians, who write about what was happening in America in the closing decades of 20th century and the opening years of the 21st, and who take the approach of Lewis’ Harding and concentrate on “big currents of ideas,” will dwell on this struggle rather than on the petty fights over spending, taxes, and regulatory matters that occupy the attention of the mainstream press and the public today.

What I am addressing here is, of course, the culture war. On one side of this conflict, Auden’s side, we have the conservatives. These folks believe that radical efforts to improve society, especially those that attempt to substitute larger and more powerful government for the existing moral order, always yield evils that are worse than those that the reformers set out to cure. Not the least of these evils is the inevitable onset of massive corruption, which eventually destroys the social order.

As Auden indicated, this conservative belief is rooted in the concept of original sin. And whether one believes in the concept’s “poetic truth,” to use Auden’s term, or subscribes to the historical accuracy of the story behind it, original sin is, as G. K. Chesterton once noted, the one Christian teaching for which there has always been abundant empirical evidence.

On the other side in this conflict we have, for lack of a better term, liberals. These are folks who, whether they know it or not, are, as Auden pointed out, modern day acolytes of Rousseau, the man who Carlyle once noted “set the world on fire” with his ideas.

The fundamental notion underlying these fiery Rousseauian ideas is that the concept of “original sin” is bogus; that vice and error are not natural to mankind but introduced from without, caused, for the most part, by bad institutions.

This seemingly simple idea proved to be highly incendiary when introduced into the tinderbox that was France in second half of the 18th century. For starters, it called into question the very foundations of European society, which was known in Rousseau’s time as “Christendom,” and it led men to believe that radical changes in the institutions of government could produce utopian outcomes.

From these roots sprouted the fanatical belief, which became a hallmark off all subsequent ideological movements related to Rousseauian thought, that the promised utopia would be so wonderful that any action, no matter how harsh, would be justified in its pursuit. Georges

Danton, one of the most radical of the French revolutionaries, put this sentiment this way: “These priests, these nobles are not guilty, but they must die, because they are out of place, interfere with the movement of things, and will stand in the way of the future.”

When the smoke cleared some 26 years later on a Europe devastated by the French revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars, the Rousseauian ideas that lit the fire on these great conflagrations were not only still burning, but were in the process of lighting vast new blazes that would burn even brighter and be even more deadly.

The first of these was socialism, which was followed by communism, fascism and big-government liberalism, all of which openly challenged Christianity for supremacy over the hearts and minds of Europeans and Americans alike by promising a society that would be more just than those governed according to Christian principles, and also more prosperous, more proud, and freer from what Rousseau regarded as the “iron chains” of conventional morality that he maintained were forced on the citizens of Christian societies.

Europe smoldered as, one by one, these mountainous blocks of ideologies rippled across the landscape. And eventually Europe burned, and hundreds of thousands died; and then it burned again, and millions died, and then it smoldered, and tens of millions suffered under the yoke of the new, “scientific,” Godless utopias. In the end, communism and fascism were discredited. But socialism not only survived, it emerged from these conflagrations more powerful than ever.

Sometime along the way, nihilism, another bastard offspring of Rousseauian thought, formed an unholy alliance with the ideas of Nietzsche, Rousseau’s brilliant 19th century counterpart, and swept across the continent, feeding on the corruption that sprouts from these morally bereft ideologies wherever they set down roots.

For years, Americans watched with horror as Europe was consumed by these ideological malignancies, unaware that they were setting down deep roots within their own borders. The Great Depression opened the door for big government solutions to the nation’s social problems. World War II provided the yeast to make this movement rise, and by the time Lyndon Johnson entered the White House in late 1963, the nation was ready to buy his feverish, utopian dreams of creating a “Great Society” via a massive ramping up of the power of the federal government.

Johnson was one of the first of a new breed of popular liberal politicians, whose personal habits and morals were odious, but who claimed great moral worth by virtue of the Rousseauian concept that character is not a function of how an individual conducts his or her personal life, but on how strongly he or she “cares” about others.

This represented a clear break from the traditional American understanding of morality, which is deeply rooted in the Christian principle of love thy neighbor, and holds that moral goodness is shaped and tested, first and foremost in relationships that are up close and personal.

As my friend Claes Ryn put it in his remarkable book, *The New Jacobins*, the new virtue requires no concrete and personally demanding obligation on the individual. It is enough that he or she “entertain benevolent sentiments for various abstract entities, such as ‘the people,’ ‘mankind,’ ‘the proletariat,’ ‘the poor’ ‘the downtrodden,’ ‘the starving third world,’ or the like.”

Claes notes that the consequences of replacing the old moral ethos, with its roots in Judeo-Christian teaching, with the modern substitute of “sentimental love of mankind” had profound and far-reaching consequences.

One of these was to shift the burden of moral responsibility away from individuals, local communities, and private charities to the government, which was more than happy to take on these new responsibilities in exchange for sizable increases in power. Another was to promote international adventurism. After all, why restrict the application of benevolent political schemes to American citizens only? And so developed Johnson’s enthusiasm for pursuing the then-minor conflict in Vietnam under the benevolent banner of freeing these noble people from the despotism of big government Communism.

Not surprisingly, the dismal failure of this new morality to produce either a Great Society at home or to change South Vietnam into a free democratic state opened the door to widespread nihilism, which arrived in America under the banner of “post-modernism.”

In this cynical atmosphere, questions were raised about the meaning of such words as “right,” “wrong,” “truth,” and “character.” Radical skepticism and relativism inflicted the universities. And late in the 20th century, 214 years after the death of Rousseau, American voters elected a president who was, even more than Lyndon Johnson, a near perfect representative of the moral and ethical squalor, as well as the corrupting nihilism, to which Rousseau’s writings gave birth.

This, in fact, was a president who once told Tom Brokaw that "character" has nothing to do with one’s personal conduct but is demonstrated "most effectively" by "what you fight for and for whom you fight." Specifically, he said he believed that the goodness of his own character should be measured by "the fact that I've stood up for the American people for things like fighting for the Family Leave Law, the Assault Weapons Ban or the Brady Bill or the v-chip for parents, or trying to keep tobacco out of the hands of kids and a lot of other issues."

Corruption flourished. Campaign irregularities proliferated. Sleazy characters appeared in some of the highest offices in government. Federal law enforcement agencies became grossly corrupted. Minimal standards of decency and decorum were ignored by the President himself. Victims of his debauchery were subject to intimidation. Perjury was excused. Words lost their meaning. America bombed small, third world countries on the flimsiest of excuses, sometimes for no other reason than to deflect domestic attention away from the corruption of the President. The public became apathetic.

And today the fight goes on. The big gaudily colored fight for the heart and soul of America; a vast, social revolution of a fight; a fight that is larger than any individual; a fight that truly is the culmination of not just one but several centuries of plots; a fight that will make future historians forget about “police court news;” a fight that will ultimately determine the conditions under which most of mankind will live in the 21st century.

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