

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

A nondescript express in from the South,
Crowds round the ticket barrier, a face
To welcome which the mayor has not contrived
Bugles or braid: something about the mouth
Distracts the stray look with alarm and pity.
Snow is falling. Clutching a little case,
He walks out briskly to infect a city
Whose terrible future may have just arrived.

W.H. Auden, December 1938

APOCALYPSE SOON, REDUX. I had occasion last week to meet with a few old friends who have been involved in the counter-terrorism business for a long time, and needless to say, they didn't cheer me up. None pretend to know exactly what is coming, or when. But then, none doubt that the bad guys are planning something big and will most probably try to pull it off sooner rather than later.

One of the people there was my old friend Peter Probst, whose views on the threat of terrorism first appeared in these pages in a piece I wrote seven years ago entitled "Apocalypse Soon?" (See last Friday's "From the Archives") The tag for the story on the cover of the research package in which it appeared read as follows:

"Experts tell us that terrorism has shifted from the specific targeting of individuals to attempts to inflict mass casualties. U.S. targets -- both abroad and at home -- will be subject of increasingly more murderous attacks."

Recently, a client mentioned that article to me and said, "You were sure right about that." It was a nice compliment, but the truth is that I wasn't the one who was right. It was Peter, and another old friend, Steve Emerson, whom I also cited in that January 1996 article.

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If I was personally right about anything in that piece, it was what I wrote about Steve, who was under tremendous pressure at the time from “mainstream” Muslim groups across America. They claimed he was talking about a threat that didn’t exist, and that he was a dangerous alarmist who was motivated solely by personal prejudice against Islam. They were also engaged in a vicious campaign to discredit him in the media and to intimidate him with threats of violence and even death. I said this.

Peter and I share a mutual friend named Steve Emerson, who is, like Peter, an expert in the field of international terrorism. Steve specializes in the study and investigation of terrorist movements, intelligence issues and the Middle East.

Steve is the author of four books dealing with U.S. national security and the Middle East, and has written extensively for newspapers and national publications. For almost three years, he has concentrated on the rise of radical Islamic extremists networks around the world, and in particular their links and infrastructure throughout the United States. He is a very courageous man. In my opinion, he is an authentic American hero for pursuing his important work in the face of continuing threats to his life.

Anyway, when I asked Peter last week what he thought might be coming down the pike he gave me a copy of a speech he delivered last December at the Sandia National Laboratory Conference on Strategic Indirect Warfare. This presentation contains some interesting and well-informed scenario spinning. But the observation that I especially wanted to pass along this week has to do with Peter’s view that Osama Bin Laden isn’t just out to kill a lot of Americans for the sake of killing Americans. He is, Peter maintains, “increasingly focused on the American economy.”

Peter points out that “Bin Laden thinks strategically,” and notes that his stress on doing severe economic damage dates back to his early fatwas, in one of which he said the following.

“We -- with God’s help – call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God’s order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.”

More recently, Peter points out, in his December 27 tape Bin Laden said:

“If their economy ends they will busy themselves away from the enslavement of oppressed people . . . It is important to concentrate on the destruction of the American economy . . . These blessed attacks have caused by their own admission to markets in New York and elsewhere, more than a trillion dollar loss with the help of God Almighty . . . I stress the importance of carrying on Jihad against America militarily and economically. America is in decline . . . the economic drain is continuing but more strikes are required and the youths must strike key sectors of the American economy.”

In reference to skyjackers, he said.

“I hope God will receive them, those who have shaken the foundation of America and have struck the American economy in its core and have struck the biggest military might in its heart with the help of God Almighty.”

Peter's conclusion is as follows:

“I think there can be little doubt that Bin Laden's immediate target has been the American economy and, more specifically, New York City . . . If nothing else, Bin Laden is a man of conviction and uncommon resolve. For these and other reasons, I believe he again will target the American economy and, more probably, New York City. . . I believe Bin Laden is obsessed with New York both as a target and a symbol. It is a symbol of American wealth and greatness and, in his eyes, a symbol of American corruption and evil. New York City is the financial capital of the world. It is home to two stock exchanges, headquarters of major banking and financial institutions, and home of the New York Federal Reserve. New York is also the home of the largest Jewish community in the United States, and as we all know, Bin Laden has a special place in his heart for the Jews.

I think Bin Laden will be back and, although he may seek mass casualties, his real target has been and will continue to be the American economy. He has seen the Stock Market's wild gyrations as a consequence of the 11 September attacks and the damage to the economy that resulted . . .

Peter goes on to outline some specific threats that he considers possible. I won't catalogue them here, but if you want a copy of his speech, let me know. I've scanned it into a word file and will e-mail it to you.

SPEAKING OF TERRORIST SCENARIO SPINNING. One of the reasons I chose not to outline some of Peter's thoughts on what specific acts of terror Bin Laden and his associates might commit is that this exercise has become exceedingly commonplace in the mainstream media. As the old Irving Berlin song goes “Everybody's doin' it, doin' it doing' it.”

I must say though that no one does it as well as Peter. Indeed, it is fair to say, that he was among the first official practitioners of this exercise, having co-authored a several hundred page report in 1994 for the Pentagon's Office on Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict entitled “Terror 2000,” in which he predicted that the terrorist onslaught was coming and discussed the forms it might take in frightening detail.

Although there are copies of it around, the report was never formally issued. It was considered to be too “alarmist” and far-fetched by the “experts” at the CIA and the Pentagon. The following are a few lines from Chapter 7, which was titled, “Future Face of Terrorism.” And please remember that this was written in 1994.

“Tomorrow's most dangerous terrorists will be motivated not by an urge to further a political ideology but by fierce ethnic and religious hatreds. Their goal will not be political control, but rather the utter destruction of their chosen enemies. Biological and chemical weapons and improvised nuclear devices are ideal for their purposes . . . The most ominous trend in terrorism is also a matter of technology. With the end of the Cold War, weapons of mass destruction have slipped their traditional controls. If improvised nuclear weapons and agents are not yet available to terrorist groups, they soon will be. The proliferation of technologies of mass destruction and the proliferation

of groups that actively seek mass casualties has forever changed the face of terrorism . . . chemical and biological weapons are even easier to acquire. Neurotoxins are closely related to many pesticides; anyone capable of making common agricultural chemicals can make Sarin or Soman . . . similarly, viruses that cause massive internal bleeding and of which there is no known cure -- the so-called hemorrhagic fevers -- could well find a place in the terrorists' inventory . . .”

Today, nine years later, it is not uncommon to find school children who are fully conversant in the use and effects of many of the “alarmist” terrorist methods that Peter discussed in *Terror 2000*, such as dirty bombs laced with nuclear material, suicide bombers, and the use of biological and chemical weapons such as anthrax, smallpox, sarin and ricin.

I once asked Peter if the scenario spinning that is so common in the media today does not serve to give terrorists ideas. He said he thought not, that the bad guys were certainly wise enough to have considered all of these options and probably a few more.

Yet, last week Peter referred me to a web page that he seemed to think was at least a little shocking. It was report on the state of Nevada's website that outlined in creative detail the “risk of terrorism and sabotage against Repository Shipments” of nuclear material to Nevada's Yucca Mountain, where the federal government wants to store the nation's nuclear waste whether the people of Nevada want it there or not.

The paper in question can be found at www.state.nv./nucwaste/trans/risk13.htm. The ostensible purpose of the document is to outline the need for a new “consequence assessment” of the federal government's plan to transport and store nuclear waste in Nevada. The real purpose appears to be to delay or halt the plan by raising questions about its safety during a time of heightened fears of terrorism. The practical consequence of the paper could be to give future terrorists a blueprint for doing considerable amount of damage by blowing up a shipment of nuclear waste.

I won't detail the paper in question, except to say that it contains schematics and specifications for all of the various “man-portable anti-tank weapons” that might be used to fire upon trucks or rail cars carrying such material; pictures of terrorists actually employing such weapons; pictures and specifications of the “shipping cask shell materials and thicknesses” of truck casks that are used to carry such material (which relate to the above-mentioned specs for the penetration capabilities of the anti-tank ordinance); cross section pictures and specifications of the “large MPC rail transport casks” that would be used to transport the materials by rail; and maps showing the “highway and rail routes most likely to be used” to transport high-level nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain, Nevada.

Osama. Phone home.

EVER WONDER HOW WE GOT INTO THIS MESS? Regular readers are aware that I do not have a high regard for Bill Richardson, one of many mediocre hacks that Bill Clinton placed in senior foreign policy positions. So I was amused last week by Jeffrey Goldberg's article in the February 10 issue of the *New Yorker* about a trip that he took with the unfortunate U.N. Ambassador in April of 1998 to visit the Taliban in Kabul.

According to Goldberg, Richardson had a “whole range of issues” that he wanted to discuss with the Taliban leadership, including America’s irritation with the fact that Osama bin Laden was then a guest of theirs.

The first problem that arose upon arriving in Kabul was that Richardson had to meet with the second in command of the Taliban because the boss of this ragtag group of cave dwelling, religious fanatics, one Mullah Omar, “rarely left Kandahar and . . . in any case, refused to meet with non-Muslims.”

Never mind that this particular “non-Muslim” was a senior official in the government of the United States of America, who had flown half way around the world to conduct what Goldberg described as the “first Cabinet-level negotiations” between the U.S. and the Taliban, and who was so close a confidant to the President of the United States that he had once been asked to help spirit one the priapic president’s young sex partners out of town when it looked like she might cause trouble.

Needless to say, the number two Taliban thug who did agree to meet with Richardson, one Mohammed Rabbani, showed further disdain for the American Pooh-Bah by subjecting him to a “long wait” before showing up. And then, of course, he and his “delegation” dissed Richardson, when the big good-natured lug tried some “ice-breaking small talk” on them.

In fairness, Goldberg, who “the freewheeling Richardson” allowed to sit in on this “Cabinet-level” diplomatic meeting by describing him a “note taker,” didn’t see it this way. Goldberg said the reason the Taliban reacted to the “small talk” with “incomprehension” was because they were “ignorant of diplomatic niceties.” This is possible, of course. But, then again, they knew enough about “diplomatic niceties” to gain the early advantage by letting Richardson cool his heels for a while before they showed up. I think the truth is that the thing they found “incomprehensible” was how the United States could send such a putz out in public. But, as Fox News would put, “We report. You decide.”

Anyway, according to Goldberg, the hapless but friendly Richardson “expressed the Clinton Administration’s concern that the Taliban was shielding a terrorist.” To which Rabbani, recognizing that Richardson had no arrows in his quiver, responded, “He is our guest here. He is under our control.” Apparently not knowing how to respond to this surprising answer, Richardson “consulted his State Department and N.S.C. advisers” and then “dropped it.” Shortly thereafter they all adjourned to the “banquet hall” for a “meal of rice and pigeon as gunmen circled the table.”

Goldberg is, as I indicated earlier, not critical of Richardson, but blames this fiasco (as well as another one in India during the same trip) on “an intelligence failure,” not on Richardson’s part but on the part of those who should have briefed him better. Describing the nature of this failure, he quotes one of Richardson’s former top aides, a guy named Calvin Mitchell, as saying that “we certainly didn’t know much about Osama at the time. We didn’t know the extent of his network or that he was bankrolling the entire Taliban.”

Now I have no doubt that Richardson and his crew did not know much about Osama “at the time,” even though they were on their way to a “cabinet level” meeting with the Taliban leaders, who were protecting him. But it is not clear to me what difference it would have made if they had known volumes about him. For they did know, according to Goldberg, the only important

thing, and that was that “two months before the Richardson meeting, bin Laden had issued a fatwa, a religious ruling, in which he called on Muslims to kill Americans – civilians and military.” And rather than taking this little nugget of information seriously, as anyone with any sense would have, to the foreign policy gurus who were traveling with Richardson “the fatwa was a passing source of black humor; the threat seemed too outlandish to be taken seriously.”

Lest you wonder what Richardson’s own recollection of this trip is, Goldberg offers the following.

“When I reached Richardson recently at the governor’s mansion in Santa Fe, he recalled his post-mission frustration. ‘When a foreign leader wants to deceive you, even the best intelligence is not going to prove in a foolproof way that the leader is deceiving you,’” he said, “but we need to have a better way of sensing the deception of foreign leaders.”

Now I certainly don’t have a “foolproof way” of know when a “foreign leader” is deceiving someone, but I think one place to start would be to figure that if the “foreign leader” is a murdering swine, and he is moving his lips, then he is probably lying. But, what do I know?

Despite all of this, Goldberg insists that Richardson is an “effective diplomat.” To each his own, says I. But when deciding how to headline this piece I considered two alternatives, either of which, I think, would have been appropriate. One was **MAKING SMALL TALK WITH MURDERERS**. And the other was, **SEE, I TOLD YOU HE WAS STUPID**.

THE PRETENDERS. I haven’t written anything about the democratic presidential hopefuls for a variety of reasons, the most important of which is the lack of any urgency to do so. While the various camps are beginning to marshal their forces, no individual has achieved anything like an early commanding position, which would present President Bush with the prospects of an opposition party united behind a de facto leader.

But last week’s flurry of stories about Mrs. Clinton’s popularity within her party got me thinking about the political battles that lie ahead for the Democrats, and I thought I had better write a few words, if for no other reason than to be able to say “I told you so,” next year about this time.

For starters, it seems to me that there are just two movers and shakers in the field of candidates. The first one is, of course, Miss Hillary. Like other observers, I don’t think she’ll run unless President Bush stumbles badly this year and appears to be very vulnerable. If she isn’t quite sure she has a good chance to beat him, I believe she’ll wait to run against a non-incumbent in 2008.

But if she smells blood, I think she’ll quickly join the fray. And if she does that, I think she’ll win the nomination, for not only is she highly popular with the party’s rank and file voters, she is a world-class fundraiser, and a shrewd and ruthless politician. Equally important is the fact that her competition is, to a man, pretty puny.

The second person who bears watching, in my opinion, is a mover and shaker not because he might be able to gain the nomination, but specifically because he has no chance of doing so. I am speaking about the Reverend Al Sharpton.

He can’t raise the kind of money that Mrs. Clinton can. And he isn’t broadly popular among the party’s rank and file like her. But he shares many of her strongest political attributes. Or to put

it another way, he is a hell of a politician. Like Hillary, he is shrewd and ruthless, and totally unfettered by any regard for ethical, moral and legal considerations, which, as she and her husband demonstrated time and again, is a great plus among today's mainstream Democrats, whose messianic view of their many "causes" negates any concern about means.

A cynic could argue that this could be said about all of the Democratic candidates. But I disagree. In my opinion, none of them seem to have that quality that Nietzsche described admiringly as the "ruthless affirmation of the self," which Mrs. Clinton and the Reverend Al seem to have in such abundance, and which allows them to avoid any of those politically debilitating public struggles with consciences plagued by outdated Judeo-Christian morality.

Besides these advantages, the Reverend Al has a rare combination of attributes that none of the other candidates has in such abundance. Each has some of them, but none have all them, like Al does. He is smart, relaxed, glib, funny, excellent on the repartee, firm and confident in his beliefs, and most importantly, he is in a position to say whatever he chooses without concern about ruffling the feathers of "moderate" Democrats and independents, since he doesn't have to worry about gaining their support in a general election.

As such, I think Sharpton will regularly rattle the cages of his fellow candidates, forcing all of them to take positions that are more extreme than they would like to take on a variety of issues. No talking head has picked up on this yet, to my knowledge, but it is worth noting that unlike Jesse Jackson, Sharpton's immediate predecessor in the role of "the black candidate," he can blast away with impunity at any and all of his competitors on any and all subjects, since he has no realistic expectation of gaining anything of value politically by throwing in with one them. This is particularly true on issues having to do with race and class, and this could hurt the party's image with the mainstream independent voters in the general election.

A really good, world-class politician would welcome a foil such as Sharpton and play off his extreme statements with common sense and humor as a means of establishing a unique identity with the voters. But, in my opinion, none of the Democratic candidates, including Mrs. Clinton, is a world-class politician, so I expect them all to greet Al's thrusts with either clumsy horror or strained, unconvincing indifference.

In short, besides Mrs. Clinton and the good Reverend Al, I think all of the other candidates are about equally mediocre.

Joe Lieberman is what one of my college French literature professors, who spoke English with a German accent, used to call a human "veather-wane," blowing this way and that, trying desperately to figure out what he believes about issues that most people his age have long ago resolved in their hearts and minds.

Dick Gephardt will be able to raise enough money from the labor unions to put in an appearance in Iowa and New Hampshire. And even though he doesn't say as many stupid things as he once did, he is still the same, tired old Dick Gephardt, and I can't imagine that he'll go far in a party that is looking for "new faces" in the wake of several years of suffering one political disaster after another.

If the party has any affection at all for the "old-timers," I think they'll go for John Kerry rather than Gephardt. Kerry appeals to the old-line, Eastern establishment Democrats who, as I pointed

out in the December 9 issue of this newsletter, want desperately for their party to stop choosing low-class Southern governors to represent the party of Franklin Roosevelt and Jack Kennedy.

Kerry's problem is that the segment of the Democratic party that yearns for a return to the pre-Dogpatch days is rapidly diminishing in size and importance, as evidenced by the fact that a majority of the rank and file like Hillary, a fishwife if there ever was one.

And speaking of Southern governors, there is, of course, John Edwards, the *nouveau riche* trial lawyer from North Carolina via South Carolina. I know very little about him other than the fact that people says he's "smooth," which has a familiar ring to it, given that Jimmy's nickname as a child growing up in Georgia was "hot," and Bill's was "Slick."

The Washington Post's senior liberal apologist David Broder wrote an op-ed piece on the junior Senator in early January entitled "Edwards's Raw Talent," in which he claimed that one of Edward's strongest assets is "smarts." Needless to say, I was interested to see the evidence of this, so I read on . . . and on . . . and on . . . expecting to find some interesting anecdote about a time when Edward's brainpower had saved the day. But none appeared.

The closest Broder came to offering an explanation for the claim that Edwards is smart was to note that he had "made an effort" to establish his "policy credential with a series of serious speeches late last year on national security, foreign policy, education and the economy."

But then Broder rained on his own parade by telling about Edwards' appearance on an ABC Sunday show during which he was interviewed by one of Clinton's old gofers George Stephanopoulos, who threw what he must of thought was a slow ball right across the plate for Edwards by asking him the identity of the philosopher most influential in his life.

Edwards' answer, you ask? Well, according to Broder, this guy with "smarts" "filibustered for an agonizingly long time and finally said he couldn't answer." I could be wrong, of course, but to me he sounds like a shoo-in for the Democratic Party's nomination, assuming Hillary stays on the sidelines.

If she joined the fray, I think she would tear him up. At a minimum she could come up with a list of philosophical mentors. Henry VI's lovely wife Margaret comes to mind. As does Mrs. Jellyby and Madame Defarge.

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