

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

After the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, which killed six and injured 1,000, Bill Clinton promised that those responsible would be hunted down and punished.

After the 1995 bombing in Saudi Arabia, which killed five US military personnel, Clinton promised that those responsible would be hunted down and punished.

After the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 and injured 200 US military personnel, Clinton promised that those responsible would be hunted down and punished.

After the 1998 bombing of US embassies in Africa, which killed 224 and injured 5,000, Clinton promised that those responsible would be hunted down and punished.

After the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, which killed 17 and injured 39 US sailors, Clinton promised that those responsible would be hunted down and punished.

Maybe if Clinton had kept his promise, an estimated 3,000 people in New York and Washington, DC that are now dead would be alive today.

Attributed to Cmdr Hamilton McWhorter, USN(ret).

THE POLITICS OF ENVY. Well, Bill is back, in case you hadn't noticed. And if you hadn't noticed, you must have spent the past week or so in Siberia. Or in the remote mountains of Virginia with Mark. Not only has the former leader of the Democratic Party been the object of a recent increase in derogatory e-mails, like the one quoted above, but he has also been the subject of considerable media attention, earning extensive coverage of late from such diverse sources as Chris Ruddy at www.newsmax.com, *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, *The Washington Post* and Fox News.

This can't, we think, be good for Democrats, particularly for the large brood of poult that are running for president in 2004.

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The immediate cause of Bill's higher profile is Bill himself. For whatever reason, he has decided to turn up the heat on his successor, taking every opportunity to comment on what he sees as the foreign policy failures of the Bush administration.

Among others things, Bill recently assailed President Bush's strategy regarding North Korea (as we noted last week); has been increasingly critical of Bush's relationship with Europe (or at least with France and Germany); and then early last week, he outdid even himself, telling the Conference Board (and then Larry King) that he believes the Bush foreign policy paradigm to be a threat to civilized society. To wit:

Our paradigm now seems to be: something terrible happened to us on September 11, and that gives us the right to interpret all future events in a way that everyone else in the world must agree with us.

And if they don't, they can go straight to hell.

As *The Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz (no conservative he) put it: "Bill Clinton is back on the warpath."

Of course, this recent spate of Clintonian denigration of Bush policies has been accompanied by considerable speculation from the collective punditocracy as to why a former president would break with tradition and criticize his successor so openly and aggressively, particularly on the heels of a stunning military victory.

Some observers have suggested that Clinton's shtick is all part of the Democrats' '04 strategy. As the most visible, best liked, and best known Democrat in the nation and, most importantly, a man who doesn't have to worry about facing the voters, Bill, they maintain, is the best man to make the case against Bush. He can knock Bush around, and his experience in the White House gives him the *bona fides* to do it effectively. And he is free to "take this one for the team" because he is not running for anything. No one can accuse him of criticizing a war-time president simply to pick up a few votes, as they could (and have) John Kerry, Howard Dean, Dennis Kucinich, and the rest of the anti-war Democratic presidential wannabes. Or so the theory goes.

Other observers have been considerably less charitable to the priapic former president. Last week, Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich suggested, not unreasonably, that Bill just can't let go of the limelight and is jealous of Bush's success. Newt told Sean Hannity:

President Clinton suffers from a very bad case of victory envy . . .

Victory envy is when you're a loser and you didn't have any victories and now you see a guy who did it for real. And you realize that after all your puny Tomahawk missiles and your puny midnight or 2 a.m. attacks on the information building - I mean, all the different pathetic things that President Clinton did in foreign policy - suddenly you see what a real commander in chief and a real president is like.

I think President Clinton can't take it. I think he's being so critical and so harsh because it drives him a little nutty to see what a real commander in chief who really understands the presidency and who's really prepared to stand up and defend America is doing.

Now, in our opinion, the Gingrich theory is far closer to the truth than the "Bill-taking-one-for-team" hypothesis. Anyone who believes that Bill Clinton is taking anything for anyone but himself is nuttier than North Korea's Kim Ding Dong. If there's one thing that even the staunchest Democrat should be able to concede about Bill, it is that he was possibly the most self-absorbed man ever to sit in the White House. And given some of that building's previous occupants, that bar was set high. Democrats waiting for Bill to take one for them (presumably in return for the many hits they took on his behalf) will, we think, be waiting a long time.

That said, even Gingrich's speculation seems, to us at least, not quite right; or, at best, only partially right. In our opinion, the quote at the top of this newsletter, and the hundreds of similar quotes, jokes, and stories routinely making the rounds via radio and television talk shows, e-mail distributions, and the routines of late night comedians, are the real key to understanding Bill's bout of verbal diarrhea.

Whereas Gingrich suggests that it drives Bill nuts to see Bush succeed where he failed, we think that what drives him even crazier is the idea that Bush would not need to succeed if Bill had simply done his job. It's not just that Bill is bothered by Bush's success, *it's that he's bothered by the fact that Bush's success comes at his expense*. Bush has been successful in dealing with terrorists, in dealing with Saddam, and, it appears, in dealing with North Korea by doing precisely what Bill lacked the guts to do. Bush's actions are not only creating for him a successful legacy, they are, in the process, undermining Bill's.

Bill would just as soon we all remember only the good times: the booming stock market (the NASDAQ at 5100!); the unprecedented period of sustained economic growth; in short, the peace and prosperity. That's the legacy he wants.

What Bill doesn't want is for people to remember that Osama bin Laden became a serious problem only after Bill refused a Sudanese offer to give up the Saudi killer. He doesn't want people to remember that it was he who allowed Saddam to kick the original inspectors (UNSCOM) out of Iraq and did virtually nothing in response. He doesn't want people to remember that amid much celebration, he signed the agreement with the North Koreans that gave them eight-plus years to continue development of their nuclear weapons program without Western interference, indeed, with Western help. He doesn't want people to remember that Yassir Arafat waited patiently for "the most powerful man in the world" to finish up his "daily briefings" with a 23-year-old intern. That's not the legacy he wants.

But every time Bush succeeds, the world is reminded that Clinton failed.

Recall, if you will, that the last time Bill was so openly and aggressively critical of President Bush was immediately after the latter took office, when folks like Vice President Cheney began talking about the "recession" that Clinton had bequeathed them. Just as now, Bill couldn't bear

the thought that the legacy he so carefully crafted could be tarnished. The great and powerful Oz does not like the idea that the curtain can be pulled back.

Now, it would be easy to dismiss Bill's public protestations as simply the last, desperate efforts of a legacy-obsessed politician trying to preserve his place in history. And indeed that may be the case. But for Democratic presidential candidates, Bill's high, anti-Bush profile will almost certainly create some significant problems.

First, Bill's blatherings put the reasonably pro-war (for lack of a better term) Democratic candidates, including frontrunner Joseph Lieberman and former House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt, in a very tough spot. In supporting the administration, they have staked an honorable position that has nevertheless alienated them from a considerable segment of Democratic primary voters. Now, they find themselves on the opposite side of the issue from the man who, without question, still holds the greatest sway of any politician among party faithful. Lieberman and Gephardt will have a difficult enough time defending their positions against the likes of John Kerry, John Edwards, Al Sharpton, and (chortle) Carol Mosely Braun. To have to defend themselves against Bill Clinton as well may be more than they are able to handle. Opposition to Bill may spell primary doom.

More importantly, though, by criticizing Bush, Bill continues to make himself the headline act among Democratic politicians. There is little question that Bill's antics are a touch unorthodox (to put it delicately) and, as such, they are news. The other Democrats are simply not in a position to compete with Clinton for newsworthiness while maintaining their political viability.

It is difficult enough for presidential challengers to draw media attention from the current president; but to have to steal the headlines from the king of headline grabbers as well is a nearly impossible task. As he did throughout his eight years as president, Bill continues to hog the spotlight. Or as Howard Kurtz put it, "Democratic candidates must be pondering whether Clinton is going to use up much of their remaining oxygen."

When Bill Clinton shows up on Larry King or in headlines of the morning papers complaining that George W. Bush is leading the country down the road to ruin, it would be easy for Republicans to get angry and to accuse him of intentionally undermining the current administration. And while he may be doing so, he is also undermining the fledgling campaigns of those who seek the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. You see, Bush can hold his own against Clinton. It remains to be seen whether Gephardt, Lieberman, Kerry, Edwards, Sharpton (etc., etc., *ad infinitum*) can do the same.

EXCOMMUNICATED . . . OR SOMETHING CLOSE TO IT. Last Thursday, Joseph Bottum, Books and Arts Editor at *The Weekly Standard*, published a piece that garnered scant media attention but which may send shockwaves through the Democratic establishment. Bottum, who is something of a scholar of political trends among Catholics and who moonlights as the poetry editor for Father Richard John Neuhaus's magazine *First Things*, reported that Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle had received a letter from his Bishop telling him that he could no longer call himself a Catholic. Bottum wrote:

The Senate minority leader and the highest ranking Democrat in Washington has been sent a letter by his home diocese of Sioux Falls . . . directing him to remove from his congressional biography and campaign documents all references to his standing as a member of the Catholic Church.

Not to be hyperbolic here, but this is **HUGE**. Daschle, who was raised Catholic and apparently still considers himself a Catholic, is nevertheless in open conflict with the Church's teachings on a number of issues, most notably abortion. Given this public stance, the Minority Leader's bishop, Bishop Robert Carlson of the Sioux Falls Diocese, decided that, in Bottum's words, "Daschle's religious identification constitutes, in technical Catholic vocabulary, a grave public scandal."

You see, as Bottum noted, on January 16 of this year, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's office, the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith in Rome, issued a Doctrinal Note dealing with Catholics and politics. According to Bottum:

"A well-formed Christian conscience," the note declared, "does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals."

The Doctrinal Note marks at least the beginning of the end of the Vatican's toleration of what the pope's biographer George Weigel has called "Cuomoism" in the American Church: the effort to finesse abortion by declaring oneself personally opposed but politically supportive of laws allowing abortion. Catholics have a "duty to be morally coherent," the Doctrinal Note declares, and the Catholic fight on the life issues--abortion, euthanasia, and cloning--is not some merely prudential question, to be decided by political give and take. The Catholic Church doesn't take political positions--except when politics intrudes into something, like the right to life, that ought to be beyond the power of politicians.

And while Daschle's "Catholic problem" may be news this week, Bishop Carlson was not the first to use the Doctrinal Note to rebuke an erstwhile Catholic whose political views contradict the Church. In late January, William K. Weigand, Bishop of Sacramento, unloaded on the California Governor for supporting abortion rights in contravention of Church teaching. According to the *Sacramento Bee*:

Sacramento Bishop William K. Weigand, leader of 500,000 Catholics in Northern California, called on Gov. Gray Davis on Wednesday to renounce his support of abortion rights or stop taking Holy Communion.

Speaking at a morning Mass on the 30th anniversary of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, Weigand told congregants at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament that Davis should refrain from taking communion while he continues to support abortion rights.

“As your bishop, I have to say clearly that anyone – politician or otherwise – who thinks it is acceptable for a Catholic to be pro-abortion is in very great error, puts his or her soul at risk, and is not in good standing with the church,” Weigand said. “Such a person should have the integrity to acknowledge this and choose of his own volition to abstain from receiving Holy Communion until he has a change of heart” . . .

“He goes to church and he says his prayers and that’s good,” said Weigand. “But he’s been aggressive on this issue, even boastful. I’m just trying to clarify that he is not in line with the Catholic Church on an issue that the Pope has said is the most important issue of our day.”

Now, as we noted above, Bottum is something of a scholar of political trends among Catholics, and he, among others, has noted that Catholics, at one time an overwhelmingly reliable Democratic voting bloc, have slowly but surely been moving right for several decades.

The Doctrinal Note cited above and employed by Bishops Carlson and Weigand will almost certainly have the net effect of accelerating this trend. After Davis was scolded by Weigand, the Governor’s spokesman Russ Lopez declared that the Bishop’s actions would “alienate members of the Catholic Church who support abortion rights.” And while that may be true, it will likely also alienate a significant number of good Catholics from their erstwhile Catholic Democratic elected representatives.

And as we said above, that could be huge. Bottum notes that besides Daschle:

There’s quite a list of pro-abortion Catholics in Washington – beginning with Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic minority leader in the House – who could use similar instruction in “the duty to be morally coherent.” Just in the Senate, there’s Biden, Collins, Daschle, Dodd, Harkin, Kennedy, Kerry, Landrieu, Leahy, Mikulski, Murray, Reed, and more.

Think about that. The Democratic Leaders in the House and Senate (Pelosi and Daschle) and a very possible Democratic presidential nominee (John Kerry) are Catholics, who could well be called out on the carpet by their Bishops. Many electoral experts noted that the shifting Catholic vote was what ultimately put George W. Bush over the top in 2000. If all of these Democrats are renounced by their bishops, that shift could prove even more decisive in ’04.

Conservatives (and especially Conservative Catholics) have had a tough time over the past several months as it appeared to them that one of their longtime heroes, Pope John Paul II, had turned on them, as he refused to support the American-led effort to oust Saddam Hussein. (For the record, the pope *did not*, contrary to anti-war spin, condemn the war. But that is a story for a different day.)

With this Doctrinal Note, though, the Pope may have more than made up for his “difference of opinion” with conservatives on the war. After this, it is hard to see how any U.S. politician will be able to call him or herself a good Catholic while, at the same time, embracing the platform of the Democratic Party. The rightward shift of the American Catholic Church continues.

FEAR AND LOATHING IN BEIJING. Not to belabor the point here, but just yesterday, the Chinese government not only confirmed the conclusions that we reached in last week's newsletter about how the regime's dishonesty had compounded the SARS epidemic, but it is probably still lying to the world about the extent of China's SARS crisis.

Yesterday, the Chinese government canned the Mayor of Beijing and the (national) Health Minister and cancelled the May Day holiday (the party of all parties for Marxists). Oh yeah, and it also announced that the number of SARS cases in Beijing *is actually ten times higher than had previously been disclosed*. Again, not to belabor a point, but anyone who would trust the current Chinese regime with anything at all is dumber than rock salt.

Even in the midst of the admissions of dishonesty (murderous dishonesty we'd call it), there was reasoned speculation that the regime is still covering up the extent of the epidemic. As the (London) *Independent* put it, "Even now there are doubts whether all the figures in China have been revealed." Want a taste of what lies in store if this thing is not corralled soon? Again in the words of the *Independent*:

The sense of panic amid the Chinese population has spiraled. Public opinion surveys conducted secretly by the government have revealed a rising tide of anger. People have stopped flying on planes and public meeting places are deserted. School and university classes have been suspended. In Beijing all the main international hotels are almost empty, while most people are wearing double face masks and disinfecting their homes and offices. People have been told to eat garlic and a turnip-type vegetable as an antidote. Foreign visits have been cancelled or postponed including that of Tony Blair who was scheduled to arrive this week. Shopkeepers are using surgical gloves and railway staff are disinfecting stations and giving passengers random temperature checks.

The growing unease was also evident in Canada, the country affected worst outside Asia, where a 14th person has died. Fears that Toronto's health system is now infected saw a leading hospital close its critical care unit after four staff members showed symptoms.

Meanwhile, Singapore, the country with the fourth-biggest toll, shut its wholesale vegetable market and quarantined all 2,400 workers. South Korea said it was considering a ban on some blood donations. Indonesia deployed troops to help medical staff to examine returning workers and normally bustling Hong Kong was like a ghost town.

The current Chinese regime is trouble. And, given growing concern about foreign investment drying up in the face of SARS, it is now also *in* trouble. It's a sad, sad commentary on the state of the world that so many people have had to die to prove this regime's treachery. Especially since these are hardly the first to die at its hands.

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