

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher
Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup
Senior Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

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THEY SAID IT

“Why, woman, your husband is in his old lunes again . . .
any madness I ever yet beheld seemed but tameness,
civility and patience, to this his distemper he is in now.”

Mistress Page, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, William
Shakespeare.

THE DEMOCRATS' DESCENT INTO MADNESS

Slowly but ever so surely the American political left is losing its grip on reality. Absolute, unmitigated political failure has been the hallmark of the American left for going on a quarter century now, and sheer frustration has been the inevitable result. And as this frustration continues to build, the left slips further and further into a madness that is becoming more and more readily apparent.

The problems for the left began some twenty-five years ago, when it began to lose its connection with the public on overarching ideological matters, including the economy, foreign policy, and the federal government's role in everyday life. The situation was exacerbated greatly over the past decade, as this ideological disconnect translated into electoral defeat.

As Mark and I have written several times, in spite of Bill Clinton's personal popularity, the 1990s were a dreadful decade for the Democrats; they lost their erstwhile unbreakable hold on state legislatures, governors' mansions, and the U.S. House and Senate. The electoral rout reached its apex in 2000, when Al Gore, who by all rights should have trounced any challenger, lost his run at the presidency, and handed unified control to George W. Bush and the GOP.

But the frustration did not end there. Even on its bread-and-butter issues like abortion, gun control, and welfare, the left has been stymied by a combination of presidential charisma and popular disengagement. The left could, at one time in the not too distant past, knock its opponents as anti-black, anti-women, or indifferent to the needs of average Americans. But a clever mix of marketing (“compassionate conservatism”) and free spending have, over the past couple of years, rendered even these old standards virtually useless.

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The Political Forum

8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,
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The result of this perpetual failure and building frustration has been a steady slide into irrationality. The vitriol, the venom, the fury, the downright apoplexy that President Bush has brought out in the political left is both a reaction to repeated failure and, frankly, a little weird.

Throughout the 1990s, we on the right were accused of “hating” Bill Clinton. And while I would dispute the charge personally, I will concede that some on the right probably did, in fact, hate him. And while that hatred too stemmed from political frustration (frustration at being unable to “get” him; frustration with him always making Congressional Republicans look stupid; frustration with him taking credit for conservative ideas, e.g. welfare reform), it was, in my opinion a much different hatred, both in kind and acuteness.

The right’s hatred of Clinton focused on the man’s manifest personal failings, which everyone, friend and foe alike, acknowledged, but which the left insisted did not disqualify him for the job. The left’s hatred of Bush is something completely different. I’m not sure how to describe it, but it is almost certainly both more extensive and based less on rational, observable matters. And because the public no longer reacts to the charges of racism, chauvinism, or callousness, the allegations are, by necessity, becoming more and more fanciful.

The on-going weapons of mass destruction issue provides a perfect example of this. The charge is never that the Bush crowd may have misinterpreted the data, or that the intelligence apparatuses should be upgraded. The charge is always that Bush is a liar who deliberately and nefariously misled the American public in order to pursue a military adventure that had everything to do with his personal likes and dislikes and nothing to do with protecting America.

Not to be impertinent here, but that’s just plain nuts. And it is certainly not helping the political left to reconnect with the voters that it has been alienating for a quarter century. Indeed, there is, in my opinion, little doubt that this visceral and irrational hatred of Bush and the concomitant bizarre allegations have hurt, are hurting, and will continue to hurt the Democratic Party.

In the immediate run-up to the war with Iraq, the most obvious manifestation of the left’s irrational hatred of Bush was the anti-war movement. As I noted in the March 17 issue of this newsletter, the far left appeared to have gone completely off its rocker, with protestors charging Bush with everything from genocide to Nazism to “rape” of the environment. They claimed the war was all about oil and that the blood-thirsty Bush would kill thousands, if not millions of Arab innocents in his quest for power, and would initiate an unprecedented human catastrophe.

And to “prove” their point that Bush was the ultimate illegitimate usurper, they even dredged up the tired, old accusation that he shouldn’t even be president, as he had “stolen” the election. Quoting the late (and great) *Washington Post* columnist and *Atlantic* editor Michael Kelly, I noted that many of the “anti-warriors” “held signs comparing the president and vice president of their country to Hitler, and declaring, ‘The difference between Bush and Saddam is that Saddam was elected.’”

Naturally, the speed, success, and relative bloodlessness of the war in Iraq quickly ended most such ridiculousness. But it also stoked the coals of hatred. Indeed, in the aftermath of the war, the tone and intensity of the left’s rhetoric escalated. The claims of domestic repression

disguised as national security precaution increased arithmetically. And the deliberate misrepresentation of the Bush record likewise grew more common and more aggressive.

In one now-infamous episode, nationally syndicated *New York Times* columnist and Bush-basher Maureen Dowd intentionally and manifestly distorted the President's words by use of selective ellipses to make it appear that he had proclaimed al Qaeda a spent and harmless force only days before the terrorist network struck again, killing Americans and other Westerners in Saudi Arabia. Bush had, of course, said no such thing. But that was no matter to Dowd. She wrote:

Busy chasing off Saddam, the president and vice president had told us that Al Qaeda was spent. "Al Qaeda is on the run," President Bush said last week. "That group of terrorists who attacked our country is slowly but surely being decimated. . . They're not a problem anymore."

What Bush actually said was:

Al Qaeda is on the run. That group of terrorists who attacked our country is slowly, but surely being decimated. *Right now, about half of all the top al Qaeda operatives are either jailed or dead. In either case, they're not a problem anymore.* [emphasis added]

In a rant not uncharacteristic of the post-bellum left, publicly funded PBS "journalist" (and former adviser to LBJ) Bill Moyers let loose on Bush and his congressional allies two weeks ago at a "Take Back America" conference. According to *The Nation's* John Nichols, Moyers gave, "a call to arms against government of, by and for the ruling corporate class." Nichols wrote:

Condemning "the unholy alliance between government and wealth" and the compassionate conservative spin that tries to make "the rape of America sound like a consensual date," Moyers charged that "rightwing wrecking crews" assembled by the Bush Administration and its Congressional allies were out to bankrupt government. Then, he said, they would privatize public services in order to enrich the corporate interests that fund campaigns and provide golden parachutes to pliable politicians. If unchecked, Moyers warned, the result of these machinations will be the dismantling of "every last brick of the social contract."

And while Moyer's rage is indeed evidence that some on the left have come unhinged, it is probably not even the worst of it. In my opinion, the most toxic turn in the left's post-Iraq seething is the amazing proliferation of elaborate conspiracy theories about the Bush administration that have flourished in the war's aftermath.

The opening shot came almost immediately after the President's "axis of evil" speech in January 2002, when speculation began to center on those individuals within the administration who were driving the foreign policy agenda. The culprits, it was soon determined, were the nefarious "neocons," who were pushing the nation into an aggressive "nation-building" posture.

By late last summer, the "neocons" were everywhere, and seemingly deciding everything. In August, Thomas Ricks broke a blockbuster on the front page of *The Washington Post* that threatened the very future of U.S.-Saudi relations. The story focused on an ominous RAND

Corporation briefing, given to the Defense Policy Board Advisory Council, which asserted that “Saudi Arabia supports our enemies and attacks our allies,” and that the Saudi regime is “the kernel of evil, the prime mover, the most dangerous opponent.” Ricks attributed the ominous anti-Saudi sentiments to “neocons,” within and outside of the administration. He put it thusly:

The briefing . . . represents a point of view that has growing currency within the Bush administration—especially on the staff of Vice President Cheney and in the Pentagon’s civilian leadership—and among *neoconservative* [emphasis added] writers and thinkers closely allied with administration policymakers . . .

The anti-Saudi views expressed in the briefing appear especially popular among *neoconservative* [emphasis added] foreign policy thinkers, which is a relatively small but influential group within the Bush administration.

In recent weeks, two *neoconservative* [emphasis added] magazines have run articles similar in tone to the Pentagon briefing. The July 15 issue of *The Weekly Standard*, which is edited by William Kristol, a former chief of staff to Quayle, predicted ‘The Coming Saudi Showdown.’ The current issue of *Commentary*, which is published by the American Jewish Committee, contains an article titled, ‘Our Enemies, the Saudis.’

Before long, though, the “neocon” conspiracy lost much of its punch. By the time the war actually began, the term neocon was no longer of much descriptive value, in part because it actually describes a rather nebulous concept, and in part because most of those who employed it either had no idea what it meant or, knowing its ambiguity, manipulated it to suit their purposes. In a very instructive (but mind-numbingly long) three-part series on neoconservatives and their role in the buildup to war, Jonah Goldberg, editor-at-large of *National Review Online*, addressed many of the problems with the term, writing:

[T]he use and abuse of the term “neoconservative” has exceeded even the high allowance for cliché and ignorance generally afforded to those who write or talk about conservatism from outside the conservative ant farm. In fact, neoconservative has become a Trojan Horse for a vast arsenal of ideological attacks and insinuations. For some it means Jewish conservative. For others it means hawk. A few still think it means squishy conservative or ex-liberal. And a few don’t even know what the word means, they just think it makes them sound knowledgeable when they use it.

For the most part, folks like Goldberg and others who questioned the term’s popular usage, effectively debunked the idea that “neoconservative” is a useful ideological category.

But that did not stop the conspiracy theorists.

The hawks within the administration had been identified, but the term used to describe them had become unexceptional. Why, even the milquetoast *Congressional Quarterly* referred to (Texas-born, evangelical Christian) Majority Leader Tom DeLay as the leader of the neoconservatives in Congress, thus confirming that term had truly lost all meaning and, by extension, the conspiracy no longer seemed terribly menacing.

In early May, both *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* found themselves a more explanative term, as they delved deeper into the ideological underpinnings that had so deeply affected the Bush administration's stance on war and nation building. On successive days (May 4 and 5, respectively) the publications ran pieces that went beyond the standard cliché of neoconservatism, and examined the more profound and mysterious influences on the administration's hawks.

And both came to the same conclusion: the intellectual foundation of the set of principles previously identified as "neoconservatism" could be traced to one man, an otherwise obscure classics professor from the University of Chicago, who, by the way, died 30 years ago. Both fingered the late political philosopher Leo Strauss as the font of the administration's activist foreign policy. *The Times* put it this way:

Paul D. Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defense, has been identified as a disciple of Strauss; William Kristol, founding editor of *The Weekly Standard*, a must-read in the White House, considers himself a Straussian; Gary Schmitt, executive director of the Project for the New American Century, an influential foreign policy group started by Mr. Kristol, is firming in the Strauss camp. One is reminded of Asa Leventhal, the hero of Saul Bellow's novel "The Victim," who asks his oppressor, a mysterious figure named Kirby Allbee, "Wait a minute, what's your idea of who runs things?" For those who believe in the power of ideas, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to answer: the intellectual heirs of Leo Strauss . . .

The Bush administration is rife with Straussians. In addition to Mr. Wolfowitz, there is his associate Richard N. Perle, chairman of the Defense Policy Board and the managing partner in Tireme Partners, a venture-capital company heavily invested in manufacturers of technology for homeland security and defense. Mr. Perle and Mr. Wolfowitz are both disciples of the late Albert Wohlstetter, a Straussian professor of mathematics and military strategist who put forward the idea of "graduated deterrence" — limited, small-scale wars fought with "smart" precision-guided bombs.

William Kristol, a former student of Harvey Mansfield's at Harvard, and these days editor of *The Weekly Standard*, is a highly influential voice in this crowd.

Of course, *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* were not the only newspapers to have noticed the "nefarious" Straussian influence on the Bush administration. As the *Times* readily admitted, it cribbed its story from the French paper *Le Monde*, which unsurprisingly, found Paul Wolfowitz to be the principal Straussian provocateur. Also unsurprisingly, *Le Monde* described the "Straussians" in terms virtually indistinguishable from descriptions previously given about "neoconservatives."

This makes perfect sense, of course, as the two terms are essentially interchangeable, describing the very same people and the very same intellectual approach. But with "neoconservative" having been rendered something less than shocking by over- and misuse, the term "Straussian" paints a more worrisome picture, as it is much lesser known and therefore carries a much more mysterious (and, perhaps, sinister) connotation.

What *The New York Times* did not mention, however, was that it, *The New Yorker*, and even *LeMonde* were actually late-comers to the Straussian game. The influence of Leo Strauss on the intellectuals molding the Bush administration's foreign policy has long been a primary concern of others and, indeed, was the subject of another publication. That publication in question is a "dossier" entitled "Children of Satan," published and distributed by the LaRouche (yes, as in Lyndon) 2004 campaign.

And as *Wall Street Journal* editor emeritus Robert Bartley noted, the LaRouchies were thrilled to know that *The Times* and *New Yorker* had followed in their footsteps to discover Strauss as the motivating force behind the administration's war posture, recently posting the following on the "Web site devoted to the perennial presidential campaign of Lyndon H. LaRouche Jr.":

Just weeks after the LaRouche in 2004 campaign began nationwide circulation of 400,000 copies of the Children of Satan dossier, exposing the role of University of Chicago fascist "philosopher" Leo Strauss as the godfather of the neo-conservative war party in and around the Bush Administration, two major establishment publications have joined the exposé.

Note, if you will, that the LaRouchies actually manage to sneak both phrases, neocon and Strauss, into their "news item."

As with neocon before it, though, even "Straussian" proved less than the ideal moniker for the Bush crowd. Yes, it does sound mysterious and a little ominous, but it is hardly the ideal affront. After all, the guy was a professor of classics and a refugee from both the Russian pogroms and Nazi Holocaust. He hardly seems like the father of a Zionist scheme to rule the world.

Moreover, the term "Straussian" is probably too mysterious to mean much to anyone; after all, how many people have any idea who Leo Strauss was, or know anything at all about what and whom he taught? It is worth noting that he doesn't merit a mention in either the Cambridge or the Chambers biographical dictionaries.

Additionally, those who knew Strauss personally have been very public in dismissing the idea that he could, as LaRouche accuses, be the "godfather" of anything nefarious. *The Journal's* Bartley, for example, wrote last week, that, "To those of us who have lived this history over the decades, the notion of a Strauss conspiracy is totally unhinged. Leo Strauss, I learned as graduate student in the 1960s, was a champion of ancient philosophers, a critic of attempts at empirical political science if not of modernity itself." And Strauss's own daughter, Jenny Strauss Clay, recently penned a response to the recent pieces about her father, which was also published in the *New York Times*. In it, she wrote:

Recent news articles have portrayed my father, Leo Strauss, as the mastermind behind the neoconservative ideologues who control United States foreign policy. He reaches out from his 30-year-old grave, we are told, to direct a "cabal" (a word with distinct anti-Semitic overtones) of Bush administration figures hoping to subject the American people to rule by a ruthless elite. I do not recognize the Leo Strauss presented in these articles. My father was not a politician. He taught political theory....

As before, though, such protestations did not stop those individuals who are intent on identifying and labeling the nefarious influence behind the Bush administration's foreign policy hawkishness. Neocon was too bland and Straussian to esoteric, but there is a term that, in many ways means the same thing, is better and more widely understood, and carries an even more sinister connotation.

Last Saturday, *The [Canadian] National Post's* Jeet Heer found that term and ran with it, titling his expose, "Trotsky's Ghost Wandering the White House." He wrote:

More than a decade after the demise of the Soviet Union, Stalin's war against Trotsky may seem like quaint ancient history. Yet Stalin was right to fear Trotsky's influence. Unlike Stalin, Trotsky was a man of genuine intellectual achievement, a brilliant literary critic and historian as well as a military strategist of genius. Trotsky's movement, although never numerous, attracted many sharp minds. At one time or another, the Fourth International included among its followers the painter Frida Kahlo (who had an affair with Trotsky), the novelist Saul Bellow, the poet André Breton and the Trinidadian polymath C.L.R. James.

As evidence of the continuing intellectual influence of Trotsky, consider the curious fact that some of the books about the Middle East crisis that are causing the greatest stir were written by thinkers deeply shaped by the tradition of the Fourth International.

In seeking advice about Iraqi society, members of the Bush administration (notably Paul D. Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defence, and Dick Cheney, the Vice-President) frequently consulted Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi-American intellectual whose book *The Republic of Fear* is considered to be the definitive analysis of Saddam Hussein's tyrannical rule.

As the journalist Christopher Hitchens notes, Makiya is "known to veterans of the Trotskyist movement as a one-time leading Arab member of the Fourth International." When speaking about Trotskyism, Hitchens has a voice of authority. Like Makiya, Hitchens is a former Trotskyist who is influential in Washington circles as an advocate for a militantly interventionist policy in the Middle East. Despite his leftism, Hitchens has been invited into the White House as an ad hoc consultant.

Other supporters of the Iraq war also have a Trotsky-tinged past.

In defending Heer's piece, journalist Stephen Schwartz, himself an ex-Trotskyite and influential writer on issues of Islam (Schwartz is a convert to Sufi Islam and a harsh and outspoken critic of Wahabbi Islam and its primary defender, the royal house of Saud.), claimed that "Heer's *National Post* article largely reviewed the history of Trotskyism itself," and that "Heer did not . . . contribute to the neofascist paranoia theories."

And while all of this may well be true, it doesn't change the fact that Trotsky is also considered the primary intellectual influence behind the original "neoconservatives" who, like Trotsky himself, abandoned Communism because of Stalin's viciousness and murderousness. *National Review's* Goldberg once described the original "neocons" as the "old Jewish guys — [Irving]

Kristol, Nat Glazer, Daniel Bell, etc. — from Alcove 1. (Alcove 1 was a little area at City University where the Trotskyites and anti-Stalinists sat and ate lunch in the 1930s. They hated the Stalinists, who sat in alcove 2). . .” And even Schwartz conceded that:

[T]he fact is that many of the original generation of neoconservatives had a background of association with Trotskyism in its Shachtmanite iteration — that is, they belonged to or sympathized with a trend in radical leftism that followed the principle of opposition to the Soviet betrayal of the revolution to its logical end.

So, whether Heer meant to or not is irrelevant. The fact is that he added fuel to the conspiracy fire, drawing a line from the Bushies to the founder of the Red Army, and the man responsible for the slaughter of the mutinous sailors at Kronstadt.

Neocons. Straussians. Trotskyists. Call them what you will. They are, it would appear, the driving force behind the Bush administration’s activist foreign policy.

Now, I haven’t mentioned this at all yet, but most readers will, I believe, recognize the one unifying characteristic shared by all of the aforementioned “conspirators”; they are, of course, all Jews. Names like Strauss, Trotsky, Podhoretz, Kristol, Wolfowitz, and Perle are repeated over and over again throughout the conspiracy “literature,” and Wolfowitz always appears prominently, if not first, on the final list of “conspirators” who are ultimately responsible for the “evil” Bush foreign policy.

The two authors of the *LeMonde* piece on Straussians described their subjects as “intellectual, often New York, often Jewish . . .” The title of the LaRouche document, “Children of Satan,” is, according to *The Wall Street Journal’s* Bartley, “an Aryan-nation phrase for Jews (descendants of Cain, who was the result of Satan seducing Eve, in this perfervid theology).”

Mark’s good friend Daniel Pipes, the director of the Middle East Forum and an expert on the Middle East and radical Islam, has written two books on conspiracy theories and those who traffic in them. Among other things, he has written that “the West hosts two main conspiracy theories” and that one of these involves “fears that Jews seek world hegemony.” Now, historically, as Pipes notes, this particular theory has generally been the purview of the political right. In this case, though, this fear has been co-opted by the left.

In the March 17 issue of this newsletter we noted both the growing anti-Semitism of the radical left (stemming, we suggested from a Marxist-Gramsciite morality and a clear preference for the Palestinians over the Israelis in the current conflict) and the impact that it is having and could continue to have for years to come on the Democratic Party.

In that piece, we focused primarily on the fringe elements that were protesting the then-coming war with Iraq, but this inexhaustible and inexorable search for the intellectual conspiracy behind the Bush foreign policy is part and parcel of the same phenomenon. As I noted in that piece, both the radical right and radical left share an irrational fear of Jewish conspirators; the difference is that those on the right, such as Pat Buchanan, have been thoroughly repudiated, while those on the left have actually been embraced.

So, as the left flails about, trying desperately to get traction against Bush on something – anything – its frustration is beginning to manifest itself as goofy, irrational, and, because of its anti-Semitic undertones, increasingly ugly.

To say that this creates some serious problems for the Democratic Party is a pretty dramatic understatement. The party and its faithful are frustrated, and one of the primary ways that this frustration is manifesting itself will almost certainly repel independent voters and continue to alienate one of the party's strongest traditional constituencies. This, in turn, will only add to the frustration. Not a pretty picture, to say the least.

Until the Democrats are able figure out once again who they are and what they stand for, they will wallow in electoral failure and the attending political frustration, both to their detriment and to that of the nation.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

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