

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

Monday, September 8, 2003

THEY SAID IT

“The government has grown so much under the Bush administration that the federal workforce is the largest it has been since the end of the Cold War, a new study says.

“In a reversal of years of downsizing, about 12.1 million people worked for the federal government in 2002, according to the study by the Brookings Institution’s Center for Public Service. That is more than at any other time since 1990, when the figure was 12.6 million.

“The vast majority of employees, about 8 million, worked for government contractors and organizations that received government grants. That also was the biggest area of employment growth, swelling by 15 percent since Brookings last did the study in 1999.”

From article entitled “Federal Workforce Is Largest Since 1990,” from the September 5, 2003 *Washington Post*.

BUYING TIME. As I sat, waiting for President Bush to speak last night, I listened to the usual collection of talking heads and pundits explain to Americans what it was that the President “had to do” with his address to the nation.

First, and foremost, they all said, he had to explain what American troops are doing in Iraq: Why are they there? Why are they dying? Saddam is gone, so why do *we* stay? Second, they all agreed, he had to demonstrate that the United States is making progress over there; that Iraq is not the Vietnam-esque quagmire that his opponents have vocally and repeatedly proclaimed it to be. Day in and day out, headlines portray chaos, destruction, and, worst of all, the murder of our boys and girls, and the President, they said, had to convince the American public that they are not dying in vain.

Did he do any of these things? Not really. Does it matter? Probably not.

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
The Political Forum
8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,
or visit us at www.thepoliticalforum.com

Why? Because, despite the opinions and protestation of the pundits last night, what President Bush truly “had to do” was buy a little time. And he did that. How much time he bought remains to be seen. But he bought some, and that means a lot.

You see, Bush knows as well as anyone that there are, essentially, three categories into which the American public can be divided on the twin issues of Iraq and the war on terror. These were outlined in detail recently by Victor Davis Hanson, classics scholar, military historian, and Cheney advisor, and go a long way toward explaining what Bush said last night, why he said it, and to whom it was directed.

One of these three categories consists of people like us, Mark and me and most of our readers. These are political conservatives, people who support the war on Saddam and the war on terror almost without reservation, and who need no great amount of hand holding. Sure, we may get a bit uncomfortable sometimes with tactics and rhetoric (enough already about the Iraqis needing an upgraded power grid, for crying out loud!), but in general, it all makes sense. For this group, taking out Saddam was necessary and justified, just as taking out the Taliban was. End of story.

The second category is made up of people who would oppose both the war on Iraq and the war on terror almost without reservation, and who could never be convinced, by Bush or anyone else, that the course he is pursuing is a correct and honorable one. A small fraction of this group are true pacifists. A few others are one-worlders, who believe such actions as the United States has undertaken are illegitimate without the support and sanction of the entire global community, i.e., the United Nations. And many are simply “Bush haters,” who reflexively abhor anything the man thinks, says, or does in Iraq, in Afghanistan, or at home.

The third group is made up of those who are not sure what to think about the war, or who think different things on different days. They support taking measures to protect Americans and to ensure that September 11 is never repeated, but are not sure how far and how fast the war should be pushed, and wonder about the tradeoffs between securing Iraq and sacrificing young American men and women. This group was described most precisely by Hanson, as follows.

[M]illions of other quieter Americans who are not quite sure what we are doing at the moment — perhaps a quarter of our population that is always open to the arguments of either side and calibrates its feelings by the news of any given day. These moderates and more wary supported the operations in Afghanistan and even Iraq in overwhelming numbers, and their gut instincts were redeemed by the rapid military victories in both theaters.

But the dozens of American dead in the postbellum clean-up, along with horrific murdering of foreign-aid workers, the blowing up of the U.N., and tribal and sectarian fighting in Afghanistan and the Sunni Triangle, raise doubts among them as to why we are spending so much money, and yet losing Americans each week to help the likes of such people. Would it not just be better to declare victory and go home? In a depressed economy could we not better spend the money here in the United States? Is it not the U.N.’s job to get involved? Can we not go back to police actions against al Qaeda that are quiet, cheap, and not so bothersome on the evening news?

It was to this last group to whom Bush spoke last night. The first group needs no persuasion; the second is open to none. But the third group, Davis's "millions of other quiet Americans" has grown increasingly unsure, and last night Bush had to encourage these people to stick with him a little longer.

Now, I should note that it is Bush's own fault that he had to make such a plea in the first place. Recall that this spring, in his haste to solidify the support of the moderates and to trumpet American superiority, the President let his pride get the best of him, and he made the much-discussed flight to the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln to declare an end to the major hostilities in Iraq. And while he and his defenders would undoubtedly claim that technically he never actually said the war was over, we all knew what he meant, and to deny that he was taking a victory lap is to deny the nose on one's face.

But in taking that victory lap, Bush forgot what he himself had long and repeatedly warned, that this will be a long war, with many stops and starts. The war is not over, far from it. It has, in fact, only just begun.

But Bush shot his mouth off, and now must do damage control. The American public saw the value in the effort against Saddam this spring, but has seen the value fade through the summer as the death toll has mounted. And now, as the TV commentators said before the speech, Bush must win back that chunk of the American public that remains undecided about the war, and to do so, he must show both the justification and the progress of the battle.

But that is something he cannot do with mere words. Like Thomas the Apostle, in order for this segment of the public to believe, it must see with its own eyes. Bush must produce tangible war results. Or as Victor Davis Hanson put it, "The events on the battlefield will prove one of the two sides right, and thus bring along with it the undecided and fickle. The latter must be convinced each step of the way that fighting is for the long-term and, tragically so, the safer course of action for the security of themselves and their families."

And so last night, Bush went out in front of the cameras, and stalled for time.

Will the stall be successful? In the short term, the answer is probably yes. Bush's "stay the course" speech probably persuaded a good many of those who were wavering to do just that, for the time being.

In the long run, the success of the stall depends on the success of the war. If, over the next several weeks, the administration reveals, as many suspect it will, material evidence of weapons of mass destruction capabilities and production, that would be extremely helpful. If American forces capture or kill Saddam or bin Laden or even Abu Musab Zarqzwi, that too would be helpful. Any of these would tangibly demonstrate either cause or progress and that would keep the public content, at least for a while.

But the progress cannot end there. Bush must also deliver what he promised. And by this, I don't mean that he must deliver freedom, democracy, and general happiness to the Iraqis. That promise was an afterthought designed to make the action against Saddam appear more compassionate and humanitarian, and Bush would do well to remember that.

The real promises Bush must honor are enough stability in Iraq to make it useful as a base from which to apply further pressure on the remaining terrorist benefactors. The remnants of the Saddamite regime must be routed, and a sort of quiet must descend on Iraq, permitting the United States to pressure the Saudis, both by moving U.S. troops from Saudi soil and by moving plentiful Iraqi oil. The mullahs in Tehran and the boy president in Syria must be forced either to stop funding and harboring terrorists or to begin looking for new jobs. These, along with the WMDs, were most important among the original goals of the battle for Iraq, and without them the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan will ultimately prove failures.

In the meantime, small victories would be extremely valuable, for without the small victories, the larger ones will never come. If the quarter or so of the U.S. population that is wavering loses faith permanently, then Bush will be left with an unsavory choice. Either he will have to change tactics, concede his mistakes, and withdraw, or *he* will be have to begin looking for another job. And either would constitute failure, at least by the terms the President laid out last night.

As I said earlier, Bush bought himself some time last night. What he will do with this time now that he has it is the real question. Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Bashar Assad, the mullahs in Iran, the Royal House of Saud, Howard Dean, and, indeed, a large segment of the American public will be watching closely.

CONSERVATISM: RIP. I don't think anyone could be happier than I am about the exceptional gains that the Republican Party has made since the big sweep in 1994, when the GOP took control of the House and the Senate and greatly expanded its influence in State capitols across the nation.

Hard work and dedication by scores of Republican political operatives at all levels of the party, coupled with the untiring efforts of Bill Clinton to discredit the Democratic establishment, have propelled the GOP to a position of dominance over the American political scene that was the stuff of dreams just a decade ago.

One need not be a political guru to recognize that Republicans everywhere are, at the present, optimistic about the prospects for crushing the Democrats next year, not just in the Presidential race, but in the House and Senate contests as well.

And while they try not show it publicly, there is little question that Democrats everywhere are worried about the low quality of the candidates they are fielding in the Presidential contest, and speak in dire tones about their fears that the Bush administration has, in the words of *Washington Post* ultra liberal columnist David Broder, a "well advanced plan" to create a government that is "wiped clean, on both the revenue and spending side, of almost a century's accumulation of social programs designed to provide a safety net beneath the private economy." (See "The Democrats' Descent Into Madness (Part II)" in the June 30, 2003 issue of this newsletter.)

Now, I don't want to rain on this parade, but I thought it would be worthwhile this week, which marks the de facto opening of the 2004 presidential contest, to point out that while the future for the Republican Party looks quite good, the outlook for the conservative contingent of the Party is not so rosy. Indeed, I have become convinced during the past year or so, as I have watched the

Bush crowd in action, that the victors in the decades-long political contest between radical liberalism and traditional conservatism will eventually be the liberals.

In fact, unless the iron law of pendulum politics has been permanently repealed, which I doubt, liberal Democrats are destined to one day assume the reins of a federal government that is powerful beyond the wildest dreams of such liberal icons as Franklin Roosevelt, George McGovern, Mario Cuomo, and even Hillary Clinton. Indeed, the government that awaits the eventual Democratic presidential successor to Bill Clinton is destined to make the Leviathan state envisioned by Hobbes look like a minnow.

This isn't meant as a criticism of President Bush. He must, of course, bear some of the responsibility. But to blame it all on him is to ignore the historic forces that are at work in America and the world today which virtually assure that the U.S. government is going to become larger and more intrusive every year for decades to come, no matter what this or any other president does, or no matter which party controls the White House. And like it or not, this is a prescription for utopian liberalism of the worst kind.

The forces of which I speak are many and varied. Some reflect contemporary trends and attitudes. And some are driven by grand historical forces. No one of them assures unrelenting growth in the power and influence of the federal establishment. But the cumulative impact of all of them makes the job of placing limits on this behemoth virtually impossible.

For starters, there is the fact that the vast majority of Americans, in this age of political dominance by the baby boom generation, appears to strongly support an increasingly powerful federal system. In fact, I think it is safe to say that President Bush's "compassionate conservatism" is demand driven. Or to put it another way, that it is a reflection of extensive polling data which supports the conclusion that Americans not only don't fear the prospects of "big government," but welcome the happiness that such a government promises them, not just as a group but also as individuals.

One need only listen for a brief time to the vast array of promises that politicians of both parties are making in the on-going election campaign to realize that a smaller, less intrusive federal government is not on the agenda of any politician in either party. And by all appearances this is a reflection of the fact that a vast majority of voters feel that the federal government has a direct responsibility to "do something" about any and all problems they face in their everyday lives, including the most personal.

The second factor that virtually assures an increasingly larger and more powerful federal government is the on-going war on terror. As I put it in a piece I wrote just over a year ago in an article entitled "Unintended Consequences," "Wars and other national crises are to executive power what Miracle-Gro is to houseplants." And what I also noted in that article is that the peculiar nature of this "war against terror" assures that it is destined to become the most potent fertilizer that has ever been applied to the soil that nurtures the federal government.

There are several reasons for this. The first is that this war has no foreseeable end. But more importantly, it is a war against an enemy who hides among its victims, does not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, and operates in secrecy. This requires that the

government develop vast intelligence gathering networks utilizing new technologies that allow access to the most sensitive personal information on all Americans, including financial and health records, detailed accounts of assets and expenditures, and, for those who deign to carry a cell phone, specific location at all times.

Once granted, there is no historical reason for being confident that either these new powers or the institutions they engender will be abandoned when there is no longer any rational justification for them. Furthermore, as we saw during the Clinton years, the much hailed “checks and balances” that were incorporated into the Constitution by the founding fathers are of little use today against a corrupt and unscrupulous president. And as we also learned during the Clinton years, popular elections are no assurance that dishonest individuals won’t occupy the White House, even when their corruption is evident to the most casual observer.

I put it this way in the above mentioned “Unintended Consequences” article.

“I shudder to think of the kind of information that the next unethical president will have at his fingertips, when the computers begin their task of producing a ‘continuously adaptive profiles’ via ‘comprehensive, enterprise wide surveillance’ of the myriad information that is now, and will in the future become available to ‘Big Brother.’ On that day the grim ferryman will come for the already ailing Fourth Amendment.”

But, as I indicated above, there are other powerful trends and social forces at work in the United States and the world that have nothing to do with contemporary politics and war, but which also help to assure a continued growth in the size and influence of the federal government.

One of these is the relentless increase in the complexity of modern life. We saw an example of this in the recent blackout that hit the East Coast and prompted cries from all segments of the political spectrum for the federal government to “do something” to assure that it won’t happen again, even if this means the creation of new and larger bureaucratic regulatory structures.

As I have pointed out numerous times over the years, the symbiotic relationship between technological advances and bigger and bigger government was first noted by the eminent Max Weber shortly after the end of World War I.

Weber’s point was that the rapid advances in science and technology, which became evident during this “war to end all wars” would continue after the conflict and usher in a new social class made up of bureaucrats, technocrats, and “experts” of all shapes and sizes, who would be uniquely equipped to handle the various and complex organizational tasks that would be necessary to make the brave new world of technology work.

Whereas Marx divided society into two classes, those who owned the capital and those who labored, Weber saw the emergence of this third class of white collar, technical and administrative personnel, who would, as a group, be vastly more powerful than either of the other two classes, and would, to borrow a phrase from the *Oxford Companion To The Politics of the World* “create a monolithic power structure as oppressive as that of ancient Egypt and as economically stagnant as that of late imperial Rome.” Weber put it this way.

Bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern mass democracy . . . Once it is fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy . . . The ruled, for their part, cannot dispense with or replace the bureaucratic apparatus of authority once it exists. For this bureaucracy rests upon expert training, a functional specialization of work, and an attitude set for habitual and virtuoso-like mastery of single yet methodically integrated functions. If the official stops working, or if his work is forcefully interrupted, chaos results, and it is difficult to improvise replacements from among the governed who are fit to master such chaos . . . More and more the material fate of the masses depends upon the steady and correct function of the increasingly bureaucratic organizations of private capitalism. The idea of eliminating these organizations becomes more and more utopian . . .

The objective indispensability of the once-existing apparatus, with its peculiar, “impersonal” character, means that the mechanism . . . is easily made to work for anybody who knows how to gain control over it. A rationally ordered system of officials continues to function smoothly after the enemy has occupied the area; he merely needs to change the top officials. This body of officials continues to operate because it is to the vital interest of everyone concerned, including above all the enemy.

And finally, there is another powerful factor at work in America today that virtually assures that big government will become bigger and bigger as time goes on, and this one, so far as I can tell, has gone unrecognized by the nation’s leading political observers.

I call it the intellectual corruption of conservatism, or to borrow a phrase from Julien Benda, a French contemporary of Max Weber, “la trahison des clerc,” which roughly translated means the treason of the intellectuals. This is not an easy concept to explain. But the bottom line is that the American conservative movement is in an advanced state of decay.

Like a beautiful mansion that is supported by beams which have been damaged beyond repair by the invasion of termites, conservatism still gives the outward appearance of permanence and strength. But it is crumbling because it no longer has an intellectual foundation of individuals who understand that conservatism is not an ideology, but a way of thinking about life, society, and the role of government in the affairs of men; who understand the meaning and application of Burke’s timeless warning against the “distemper of remedy;” who recognize the wisdom of Tocqueville’s concerns about the threat to individual liberty posed by governmental power, which he described as “a new dress for servitude.”

Unremarked by virtually everyone on both sides of the aisle, conservatism’s intellectual foundations have virtually disappeared. Today’s defenders of the conservative flame are almost exclusively journalists and media pundits, who have memorized the catechism of their ideology, who are loud and strident in their denunciations of that demon called liberalism, who take passionate stances on a host of cultural issues, who blindly trumpet the cause of tax cuts, but who seem to have little understanding of the basic tenets of the belief system they profess to honor.

I am not being critical of these individuals. Conservatism has desperately needed such a cadre of popular media spokespersons, and it is proper to cheer their success in promoting a conservative view to the American public on a host of important issues. But it is becoming clear to me that

they are of little long-term use in the battle against utopian liberalism if there is no intellectual leadership behind them to lend credibility to their pronouncements and to provide direction to and a framework for their efforts.

Indeed, one serious problem that has developed as the conservative cause has begun to recognize its long-held dream of establishing a strong voice in the world of mass media is the presence of a large number of highly visible and popular individuals who call themselves conservatives, but whose principle “conservative” goal is to help create and run a more efficient big government. Some of these individuals are liberals flying under false flags. Others are sincere but too dumb or too poorly educated to understand that the “conservative” big government they are helping to build will eventually fall into the hands of individuals who will use this power to destroy any gains they have made on so called “conservative” issues.

All of this is pessimistic, I know. But it should be clear to anyone paying attention that the lack of an intellectually consistent conservative voice on the American political scene has left the gates of American society undefended today against what Tocqueville described as the “immense and tutelary” power of big government, which he recognized as having the goal of taking upon itself alone the responsibility to secure the gratifications and to watch over the fate of the nation’s citizens, at the expense of their freedom.

Space does not permit a long defense of this position, so let me illustrate my point with some paragraphs from a recent op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* written by Fred Barnes, praising President Bush as a “big government conservative.” Barnes is the Executive Editor of *The Weekly Standard*, which describes itself as a conservative weekly magazine. The *WSJ* article appeared in August 15 edition and carried the headline “‘Big Government Conservatism’: George Bush Style.”

Mr. Reagan was a small government conservative who declared in his inauguration address that government was the problem, not the solution. There, Mr. Bush begs to differ. The essence of Mr. Bush’s big government conservatism is a trade-off. To gain free-market reforms and expand individual choice, he’s willing to broaden programs and increase spending . . .

When I coined the phrase “big government conservative” years ago, I had certain traits in mind. Mr. Bush has all of them. First, he’s realistic. He understands why Mr. Reagan failed to reduce the size of the federal government and why Newt Gingrich and the GOP revolutionaries failed as well. The reason: People like big government so long as it is not a huge drag on the economy. So Mr. Bush abandoned the all-but-hopeless fight that Mr. Reagan and conservatives on Capitol Hill had waged to jettison the Department of Education. Instead, he’s opted to infuse the department with conservative goals . . .

A second trait is a programmatic bent. Big government conservatives prefer to be in favor of things because that puts them on the political offensive. Promoting spending cuts/minimalist government doesn’t do that. . . Another trait is a far more benign view of government that traditional conservatives have. Big government conservatives are

favorably disposed toward what neoconservative Irving Kristol has called a “conservative welfare state” . . .

Now I have no way of knowing whether Barnes is accurate in his characterization of President Bush as being so abysmally ignorant of history, human nature, economics, and political science that he would fail to recognize that the big government he is creating to accomplish his conservative goals will eventually be used by liberals to reverse any “conservative” gains he might make and to add a few liberals “gains” on for good measure. I can see, however, after watching the Bush crowd in action for the past three years, why Barnes believes this to be true.

In any case, it is quite clear to me after reading that *Journal* article that Mr. Barnes is as politically confused as any of the liberals that he regularly ridicules on television and in print, and, as a “leading conservative spokesman” he is far more dangerous to the future health of the nation than any of them, up to and including Hillary Clinton.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

Copyright 2003. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved. Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.