

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

“They’re all Howard Dean now. They have adopted harsh, bitter, personal attacks as their approach. They are a party of protest and pessimism and offer no positive agenda of their own.”

Republican National Committee Chairman Ed Gillespe, as quoted in the September 29, 2003 edition of *The New York Times*.

IRAQ AND NOVEMBER '04. For several weeks now, we have been trying to determine how to address the situation in Iraq, or more specifically, how it might affect the political climate in this country over the next 14 months, leading to the upcoming presidential election.

This process has been complicated significantly by the fact that while we agree that President Bush did the right thing in deposing the Saddamite regime in Baghdad, and further believe that he has a far better grasp of the situation and its likely impact on the greater war on terror than do his erstwhile Democratic opponents, we are uncomfortable with the grandiose notions of nation building that have been emanating from the administration, particularly from the office of the National Security Advisor.

To be more precise, we are highly skeptical that Iraq can be transformed into the liberal, democratic Middle East oasis that Bush administration officials, including the President himself, have repeatedly asserted is the end goal of “Operation Enduring Freedom.”

Indeed, lest you have forgotten, early last month in a piece entitled “Over The Edge With Condi,” Mark tested the edge himself when he described Ms. Rice’s emphatic assertion that the United States should make a “generational commitment” to spread democracy and free markets across the Middle East as “insane.”

There are, of course, many reasons for our skepticism, including a general wariness of unrestrained, plebiscitary democracy; a deep concern about the institution of democratic practices where the foundations of liberal governance, including the rule of law and private property rights, have not first been firmly established; doubts about the compatibility between

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democratic government and Islam; and a deep suspicion concerning the democratic credentials and motives of some of those who would purportedly be responsible for helping establish said democracy (e.g. France, Russia, Turkey, the U.N.).

We might be inclined to believe that the governance of Iraq can indeed be improved from its current state by something akin to the government by “consensus and consultation,” advocated and explained by Bernard Lewis, unquestionably this nation’s dean of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. But we continue to believe that in phrasing its intentions in terms of the complete and total democratic transformation of Iraq, as a stepping-stone to doing the same for the entire Middle East region, the administration is setting exceptionally lofty goals and, in the process, setting itself up for ultimate failure.

As far as the upcoming election is concerned, however, this is almost certainly a moot point, since, when American voters go to the polls next fall, neither the administration’s promises of a new, democratic, and friendly Iraq, nor the opposition’s assurances of miserable failure will be fulfilled. Thus, what we will have in the meantime is a freewheeling debate over a very messy situation that, in our opinion, offers few advantages for the Democrats to score points.

Now, it’s not that we believe President Bush is unassailable on the Iraqi issue. Things are clearly not going as well over there as he would like, and the American public is clearly not all that happy with the situation. The problem for Democrats is that they enter this debate at an immediate disadvantage, both because they start with a significant credibility deficit on questions of national security (as have all Democrats since McGovern), and because they, collectively and individually, seem to have no ideas whatsoever about what to do now.

It is often said by those on the right that on domestic issues, the left is intellectually tapped out; that liberals are the “new reactionaries,” who have nothing new to offer to the political debate, and therefore are left with no recourse but simply to grumble about and oppose any attempts by the right to alter the status quo via such things as tax cuts, Social Security privatization, or school vouchers. And so it is with Iraq.

It goes without saying that the vast majority of the Democratic presidential wannabes oppose the action in Iraq. But to date, none has bothered to develop a plan for handling the situation now that boots on the ground are a reality. Or, if any have actually done this, they have not bothered to share such a plan with the voters. In last week’s debate, former Senator Carol Mosley Braun paid some lip service to the idea that we cannot withdraw from Iraq until we have improved conditions there. And most of the rest of the crowd professed a desire to improve the United States’ flagging relationship with the “global community” and to work with the rest of the world to bring our “occupation” to an end. Beyond these fustian platitudes, though, all that the reactionary Democrats seemed to be able to offer was “not Bush.”

A second Iraq-inspired problem for the Democratic presidential hopefuls stems from the fact that they have been forced, both by the nature of the primary process and by the mental state of those currently driving that process, into rather awkward and foolish positions on the war. There is no question that the Democratic base is angry: angry that George W. Bush is President; angry that the GOP has consolidated power in both houses of Congress; and angry that a purportedly dimwitted cowboy could rally the American people and lead them to two quick and successful

offensive campaigns in a broader war on terrorism. And while that anger has been manifest in all sorts of ways, it is most evident in its influence on the primary contestants.

Several of the hopefuls, including frontrunner Howard Dean, have staked out positions on Iraq that, while pleasing to the angry base, are entirely out of touch with the views of most Americans, making a general election victory appear highly unlikely. Others, namely John Kerry and Wesley Clark, have waffled so badly on the issue that they look both insincere and rather bungling. Joseph Lieberman, the only candidate who holds a position that is both consistent and in concordance with that of the views of the majority of the American public, is also the only one of the so-called first-tier who has almost no shot at winning the nomination.

A final reason that Iraq is a real stinker for the Democrats is that as a true minority party, one with no leadership base in Washington, they have no official leader and no official spokesman, making it possible for any party member with access to the media to comment on the issue and to appear to carry the authority of the party. Most of the time this presents no problems, but occasionally a particularly insalubrious sort will speak out and generate some unwelcome publicity. Enter Teddy Kennedy.

When Teddy told the world that the justification for the war in Iraq was dreamed up in Texas and was simply another political tool by which Team Bush hoped to enhance its popularity, the angry left stood up and cheered, believing that at long last one of its icons was speaking truth to power. Most Americans, though, thought that a risible old gasbag had run his mouth at an inopportune time on an unfortunate subject. Add to this the fact that Teddy's comments were indeed "uncivil," at the very least, and he appears to have damaged both his own reputation and, by extension, that of his party.

This will change, of course, when the Democrats choose a candidate and he or she becomes the Party's official leader. In the meantime, the contenders for this title have to deal with kibitzers such as Kennedy, who shape the public's view of the party's position on this important topic.

In this regard, it did not help the Democrats' cause that after Bush called Kennedy's rantings "uncivil," a host of Kennedy defenders emerged to whine that the President was being mean to the "respected" and bloated Senator. Among others, House Judiciary Committee ranking member John Conyers was so upset by the President's reproach that he threw a little fit of his own, insisting that "the White House should immediately apologize to Senator Kennedy for calling his legitimate criticism of the rush to war 'uncivil.'"

This flap will quickly fade from the public's mind, but it calls attention to another of the Democratic Party's problems, namely that it is being abandoned in droves by male voters, particularly white male voters, who are put off by childish bellyaching by grown men who are "hurt" because someone may have said something unpleasant about them or a colleague.

In short, the intensity of the left's anger and the concentration of that anger on the issue of Iraq, we believe, have almost certainly turned the issue into a genuine loser for all of the potential nominees. More importantly, it has focused their attention away from domestic issues which, if recent polling data is correct, is where President Bush is much more vulnerable to the traditional Democratic political assaults.

This could change, but only if the Democrats come up with a viable, reasonably specific alternative to the course that Bush is pursuing in Iraq, and then sell it to the public as such. Bush could, of course, blow it so badly in Iraq between now and the election that the public could decide that anyone would be a better choice to address that problem than he is. But this would be up to Bush and would have nothing to do with the Democrats unless they unite to sabotage his effort there, which seems unlikely. In the meantime, carping about his actions is not going to win the day, and it diverts attention away from the issues on which Bush is much more vulnerable, namely the “economy, stupid.”

STICK A FORK IN CLARK AND BRING ON HILLARY. Last week’s newsletter was dedicated exclusively to the entry into the race for the Democratic presidential nomination of retired four-star general Wesley Clark. While the media had spent the prior weekend hyping the general’s candidacy mercilessly, Mark argued that Clark, a political novice and true outsider, would struggle to mount an effective campaign, and I suggested that Clark was most likely merely a surrogate for Hillary Clinton, whose job, in his patron’s eyes, would be to keep Howard Dean from winning the nomination and becoming the titular head of the party.

Last week, I became convinced that Mark was not only right in his assessment of Clark’s chances at becoming President, but, if anything, gave the general even more of a shot than he actually has. Though you’d never know it by the mainstream press accounts, Clark’s first week as a candidate was a disaster, and I believe that he now has almost no chance of securing his party’s nomination. This is good news for Howard Dean; moderately good news for George W. Bush; and news that, in my opinion, makes it ever more likely that Hillary Clinton will defy conventional wisdom and enter the contest.

Clark’s week started well enough, as he, like Howard Dean before him, made an appearance on the covers of *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*. But by Tuesday, the wheels had begun to come off the cart. At a “celebrity forum” at Foothill College, General Hugh Shelton, retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, as such, Clark’s one-time boss, had some rather unpleasant things to say about his former charge. According to the *Los Altos Town Crier*, a dialogue between the forum’s moderator and Shelton on the topic of Clark went like this.

“What do you think of General Wesley Clark and would you support him as a presidential candidate,” was the question put to him by moderator Dick Henning, assuming that all military men stood in support of each other. General Shelton took a drink of water and Henning said, “I noticed you took a drink on that one!”

“That question makes me wish it were vodka,” said Shelton. “I’ve known Wes for a long time. I will tell you the reason he came out of Europe early had to do with integrity and character issues, things that are very near and dear to my heart. I’m not going to say whether I’m a Republican or a Democrat. I’ll just say Wes won’t get my vote.”

Now, stop for a minute and think about that. First, Shelton said that Clark was removed from command because of “integrity and character issues.” Then he said he wouldn’t vote for him. Imagine if you will if, in the mid-1990s, Norman Schwarzkopf had decided to run for office and his former boss, Colin Powell, had said the same thing about him. Not only would

Schwarzkopf's campaign have been immediately demolished, but the media would have had a field day with the comments about integrity and character.

But, given that Clark is at least nominally a Democrat, the mainstream media did not find Shelton's comments necessarily newsworthy. Nevertheless, thanks to the magic of the internet, and to intrepid cyber-newsmen like Matt Drudge and *Opinion Journal's* James Taranto, enough people read what Clark's old boss said about him that it will certainly present significant problems for the candidate in the future.

Don't think for a second, for example, that if Clark manages to stay competitive in the race that Dean, Kerry, Gephardt and the rest of the ten little candidates won't drag that quote out and use it prominently in debates and campaign advertising.

Even before last week, there were questions about Clark's character. For starters, he apparently rubs elbows with the seediest contingent in the Democratic Party, namely Bill, Hill and Chairman Terry McAuliffe. To make matters worse, he was dismissed from duty in Europe, apparently for "character" reasons, by, of all people, Bill Clinton, which is the equivalent of being called ugly by a frog. And yet, he had no problem sucking up to the man who fired him. Add all of that to what Shelton had to say, and the purportedly magnificent biography no longer appears quite so impressive.

By the end of the week, things had gone from bad to worse for Clark, though once again, one would know little about it from reading or watching the mainstream media. And not surprisingly, it was also once again Matt Drudge who broke the big story, namely that Clark had, as recently as two years ago, raised money for the Pulaski County Republicans in his home state of Arkansas, and had been effusive in his praise of President Reagan, both Presidents Bush, Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. Specifically, he said the following.

"That's the kind of President Ronald Reagan was. He helped our country win the Cold War. He put it behind us in a way no one ever believed would be possible. He was truly a great American leader. And those of us in the Armed Forces loved him, respected him, and tremendously admired him for his great leadership . . .

"President George Bush had the courage and the vision . . . and we will always be grateful to President George Bush for that tremendous leadership and statesmanship . . .

"And I'm very glad we've got the great team in office, men like Colin Powell, Don Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice . . . people I know very well - our president George W. Bush. We need them there . . ."

Now, for almost any other retired general, such praise for the respective commanders in chief under whom he had served would not be a big deal. But for Clark it is. Already, he has come under some pretty heavy fire from his political left for being a "Democrat-come-lately" and for having chosen a party not out of principles and convictions, but out of political expediency. Indeed, left-wing activists, who tend to dominate the primary process, have questioned Clark's Democratic *bona fides* ever since he first surfaced as a possible candidate several months ago.

And this new revelation will do little to help solidify his position as a “real” Democrat. As his opponent Joe Lieberman put it on Friday, “I was fighting (Bush’s) reckless economic strategy while Wes Clark was working to forward the Republican agenda by raising money for the Republican Party.”

This will almost certainly further complicate Clark’s relationship with the radical left-wing elements who have been so vocal in condemning the war in Iraq; who have helped establish the opposition position on Iraq; who have provided a good portion of the early support, financial and otherwise, that has propelled Dean to the head of the pack; and who cringe at the very idea of nominating a retired general, particularly one with no history with the Democratic party.

As a veteran, and especially as a commander who directed the campaign against the Serbs in Kosovo, Clark is already viewed incredibly suspiciously by the anti-war left. And while such sentiments are probably out of step with the vast majority of those on the left, there are, in fact, some who believe that Clark’s military background actually makes him unfit to be the Democrats’ nominee. Take, for example, the following, which is the lead paragraph of an article published by the radical anti-war group “counterpunch.org,” with thanks to James Taranto for pointing it out to us.

“Gen. Wesley Clark is a major war criminal. Please don’t be fooled by the current well-orchestrated push to nominate Clark as Democratic Party nominee for president, a trap which Michael Moore has apparently fallen into as well as a number of other well-meaning peace people.”

In my opinion, all of this will simply be too much for Clark to overcome. He may be a bright guy, but he is also, as Mark noted last week, a political neophyte. And these “difficulties” would, taken collectively, present an extreme, perhaps insurmountable, challenge even to the most grizzled and talented politician, much less to a newbie like Clark.

Now, if I am right about this, then the question becomes “what impact will the Clark campaign’s ultimate failure have on the rest of the players in the race?”

Howard Dean, for one, will benefit substantially. With Clark out of the picture, he once again would occupy the front-runner’s spot by himself. Not only would the race again become his to lose, but he would regain the significant fund-raising advantage that comes with the likelihood that he will win the nomination. Clark is a distraction for Dean, both because he requires an expenditure of energy to combat and because he draws attention away from the sole favorite. Dean will almost certainly breathe easier when Clark is no longer a legitimate threat.

President Bush too will breathe easier, but only if Clark is down, but not officially out; that is, if Clark retains a semblance of viability long enough to make it through New Hampshire and Iowa and on to South Carolina. It is conceivable that if Clark were to win the nomination he could threaten Bush, and thus Bush would rather he not have a legitimate shot at being the nominee.

At the same time, the longer Clark hangs around, the better. Even as a second-tier candidate, Clark would draw money and attention that would otherwise be directed to more plausible contenders. He would also force his rivals, namely Dean, to spend some of their own campaign

stashes to ward off his challenge. And anything that forces Democrats to expend time, money, and energy beating up on one another plays to the incumbent's favor. Additionally, Clark's presence would keep issues like the military, war, and the battle of Iraq on the front burner in Democratic policy debates. And as I suggested in the preceding piece, this hardly helps any of the would-be nominees.

Two people who would not breathe a whole lot easier if Clark were to crash are Bill and Hillary Clinton. As I noted last week, to them Clark represents their best chance to preserve the status quo in the Democratic Party until Hillary is able fully to establish herself as the Party's leader and to mount her campaign for the White House in '08. Clark's failure would throw a wrench into their plans, forcing Hillary to make a move of her own. I put it this way last week.

“Bill and Hillary have decided that they must stop Howard Dean from winning the nomination. And while it would be nice if they could do so while maintaining Hillary's viability for '08, they will, I'm convinced, do whatever it takes to stop Dean. And to stop him, they do not need for Clark actually to win the nomination. They simply need him to “muddy the waters” enough to ensure that anyone but Dean gets the nod next July in Boston.

“If Clark is up to the task, fine. If he is not, then I think there is a good chance that Hillary will decide to do the job herself, regardless of any promises she or Bill may have made to the General, the people of New York, or anyone else about keeping her out of the race.”

After only a week of campaigning, it already appears to me that Clark is, indeed, not up to the task. And ultimately, this increases, in my opinion, the likelihood that the '04 race, like the '92 race, will pit a Bush against a Clinton.

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