

The Political Forum

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

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Monday, November 10, 2003

THEY SAID IT

“It isn’t that they can’t see the solution. It is that they can’t see the problem.”

The Scandal of Father Brown, G.K. Chesterton.

BELLING THE CAT. I listened with both interest and concern last week as President Bush outlined in a speech to the National Endowment for Democracy what he described as a “new policy” for the Middle East.

My interest was peaked by several factors.

✍ The first was that any “new policy” emanating from the President is always interesting to someone like me who covers politics for a living, even though new presidential policies in this day and age pop up with annoying frequency, like birthdays after the age of 50.

✍ The second was that this “new policy” is going to be applied in a region that is home base for America’s most dangerous enemies, as well as the spawning ground for a radical form of Islam that is dedicated to the destruction of America.

✍ And finally, there is the fact that U.S. soldiers are being killed on an almost daily basis in one of the largest countries in this region; a place that the President himself routinely notes is a principal front in what he describes as America’s “war on terror.”

In short, what could be more interesting than a “new policy” for dealing with such a place?

My concern about his speech relates to the fact that the “new policy” it outlined for the Middle East contained not a single new, practical, near-term initiative for addressing the fact that this region is home to anti-American terrorists or that U.S. soldiers are dying there.

The President made a strong case that the remedy for these two maladies is democracy and freedom. But he noted that this “new policy,” which he described as a “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East,” was going to take a very long time to produce results. In fact, it

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appears to be in such early stages of development that he was unable to offer any concrete suggestions as to how one might go about introducing democracy and freedom into such nations as Iran and Syria, given that both contain large groups of individuals in positions of power who are determined to prevent the introduction of democracy and freedom into their nations.

I was reminded of the old Piers Plowman fable about the mouse that suggested putting a bell around the cat's neck, so that he and his fellow mice would always know the location of the dangerous feline, but had no answer when asked how this was to be done. Yes, of course, the introduction of democracy and freedom throughout the Middle East would go a long way toward solving America's problems there. Who could argue with that? In fact, one wonders why a major presidential speech introducing a "new policy" was needed to advance such a hackneyed truth. One wonders, how is this to be done? As a young Prince of Denmark once put it, "That is the question."

After reading the speech over several times, it became clear that President Bush is quite taken by the rebuilding of Europe and Japan in the post World War II period, a task that included the adaptation by these two nations of democratic governments. What he seems not to understand is that this was done in the *post* war period, meaning the period *after* the enemy combatants from these nations had been defeated and their leaders killed or captured.

When the allied troops hit the beaches at Normandy and began advancing toward Berlin, they did not stop to restore the electricity along the way. Their mission was to kill Hitler, disarm the German military, and destroy that nation's capacity to wage war. Rebuilding came later, and then only after considerable discussion as to whether the German people were truly ready to live peacefully with their neighbors; a discussion that was punctuated by assurances from responsible Germans that they could lead the rebuilding effort and keep the bad guys from resurfacing. The same was true of Japan. That nation was not only defeated before the rebuilding began, but was defeated in a particularly brutal manner, which convinced the vast majority of Japanese citizens that resistance was unthinkable.

Whether the President knows it or not, this is not the case in Iraq. The war there is not over. Saddam Hussein has been neither captured nor killed. There are still a large number of dedicated, well-equipped enemy combatants engaged in daily attacks on U.S. forces. And a considerable number of Iraqis make no bones about the fact that they hate and distrust America and Americans.

Indeed, I think a good case could be made that rebuilding Iraq before the enemy there has been defeated is actually detrimental to the prospects for a democratic and free Iraq. Among other things, it severs the link between American largess and Iraqi cooperation, making the continued killing of American troops cost free to the great majority of the Iraqi people. And, of course, if Americans are taking on the difficult task of restoring basic services, then the nation's young men are free to go about the task of earning a coveted place in paradise by killing Americans, or simply gathering in large groups in the streets and jumping up and down, which seems to be a popular if unproductive national pastime.

I am not suggesting here that the United States is going to "lose the war" in Iraq. I am simply restating in a somewhat different way something I have been saying for a long time, namely that

the most likely outcome in Iraq is that America will fall short of creating a capitalistic, freedom loving, pro-American democracy there, and will settle instead for installing some sort of authoritarian government that stands some chance of being significantly less murderous and less hostile to the United States than Saddam's government was.

To expand slightly on this prediction, I think that some American president, somewhere down the line, will eventually come to the conclusion that "taking the battle to the enemy" via the introduction of combat troops onto foreign soil is not the most effective way to fight the "war on terror," since the enemy in this war has the bothersome ability to disappear into the indigenous population. Or, as Chairman Mao put it, "The people are like water and the army is like fish."

Furthermore, I think he (or she) will find that the use of the combat troops is both a dangerous and a counterproductive way of attempting to introduce freedom and democracy into societies that contain substantial numbers of well armed and highly motivated citizens who like nothing more than to kill Americans and then disappear into a sea of people who don't much like Americans either.

In the meantime, Americans will have to wait and see what exactly President Bush's "new policy" of introducing liberty and freedom throughout the Middle East will require of them. All they were told in his much-ballyhooed speech was that it would be a "massive and difficult undertaking," which is essentially how he described his "war on terror" two years ago.

In fact, it is not clear, to me at least, whether the "new policy" is something entirely new; or simply a new element in the on-going war in Iraq; or possibly a new element in the on-going "war on terror;" or if all three of these initiatives are part of a grander plan for which there appears to be no formal name as yet; or whether one or two of these initiatives is part of the third one, and if so, which two are parts of which one.

What is clear is that somewhere along the line, the primary purpose of the invasion of Iraq changed from destroying Saddam's weapons of mass destruction to a vaguely defined initiative to expose Saddam's atrocities and introduce the Iraqi people to the benefits of democracy.

Time will tell whether this new mission will prove to be as popular with the American public as the former, which was unambiguously tied to national security concerns. But the whole thing reminds me of some personal investment advice I was once given by one of my fund manager clients. He said that when you buy a stock based on a specific expectation, and that expectation fails to materialize, it is not a good idea to make up new reasons to hold it.

In the end, it just might be that President Bush's impassioned speech last week on behalf of a grand "massive and difficult" effort to launch a "world democratic movement" may not mark the beginning of a new American initiative in the world.

Instead, I think there is a possibility that it will actually have marked the beginning of the end of one of the most persistent and longest lasting conceits in the entire history of American foreign policy; namely the desire, as first articulated by President Wilson in April 1917, to employ American military power and international influence in a global crusade on behalf of the idea that it is America's destiny and obligation to make the world "safe for democracy."

I could be wrong about this, of course. But it seems to me that the notion of sacrificing American lives on the alter of nation-building may be the most important casualty of the ongoing venture in Iraq, and that Bush's speech was both a recognition of this fact and a dramatic effort to resuscitate the Gnostic dream of a world made moral by politics rather than faith.

DEMOCRATS NEVER HAVE A NICE DAY. The Democratic Party is, I believe, beginning to resemble that heartbreaking fund raising poster that one of the international relief organizations published several years ago featuring a sad looking child with the caption, "He never has a nice day."

This didn't happen overnight, of course. For the better part of a quarter-century now, Democrats have slowly but steadily been losing political power. In 1980, they semi-permanently lost the presidency. In 1994, they lost the House of Representatives and the Senate. And throughout the 1980s and 1990s they lost everything in the South, from governors' mansions, to state assemblies and senates, to control of Congressional delegations. In 2002, Al Gore, a southerner himself and the successor to another southerner, lost every single southern state, including both his and Bill Clinton's home states.

More recently, after a terrible showing in the 2002 midterm elections one year ago, and after losing control of the Governor's mansion in arguably the most overwhelmingly liberal state in the union last month to a political novice, last week the Democrats lost two more governors' races, both in the South, which was once the Party's geographical stronghold. To add salt to the wound, the loss in Mississippi featured an incumbent Democrat, and the one in Kentucky was a contest for a seat that had previously not been won by a Republican in over three decades.

And while Democratic strategists have suggested that there is no need to panic, that this is all part of the usual ebb and flow of domestic politics, I think a reasonable person could argue to the contrary. In fact, I think it entirely possible that the Democratic Party's bad weeks, bad months, and bad years are likely to continue for a long time. For while President Bush is indeed struggling to find the proper balance between guarding his own nation's security and promoting a new nation's liberty, the Democrats are struggling on a far a greater scale to do anything at all.

I know we have hit on this theme before. In fact, one of the first pieces I wrote after rejoining Mark here at The Political Forum detailed what I described then as the Democrats' "descent into madness," a theme which, by the way, has become a mainstay of political commentary on the right ever since. But that to which I refer here is more than just the loony ramblings of the anti-war fringe and the equally loony pandering to that fringe by the presidential wannabes.

No, what I believe is becoming more and more evident to serious observers of American politics is that the Democratic Party, or at least the leaders of that Party, are every day growing further out of touch with the vast majority of American voters. At the risk of sounding hyperbolic, the Democrats appear, in my opinion, to be in something of a time warp, having bought into their own hubristic spin for so long that they are unable to sense the time or the warp, much less to do anything about it.

Though there have been signs of the increasing inability of Democrats to connect with a majority of voters for some time, including the Reagan Revolution in 1980 and the Gingrich Revolution in 1994, the proverbial warning lights have been flashing more intensely and more frequently over the last few months.

I offer the following example to bolster this position, recognizing that the Democratic Party's position on any one of these issues might not be terribly damaging or even wrong politically, but that the collective impression given by this litany of angry, reactionary approaches to the issues of the day is of a party that is out of touch with the times. Examples include vigorous opposition to the partial birth abortion ban; the continued filibustering of Bush's judicial nominees, now including Judge Janice Brown; the inability appropriately or intelligently to respond to positive economic news; the unvarying reliance on class warfare-based economic appeals; the ongoing inability to present a rational, reasonable alternative to President Bush's program in Iraq; Howard Dean's injudicious comment about wanting to be the candidate for the Stars and Bars waving pickup truck drivers of America and his equally asinine exhortation to Southern voters to quit basing their votes on such "frivolous" things as "race, guns, God, and gays."

The Democratic Party still has a solid constituency, of course. I would guess that at least 25% of voters agree wholeheartedly with the party's leaders, probably about the same percentage of voters who unreservedly agree with GOP on each and every issue. The problem for the Democrats, as I see it, is that the remaining half of the population, which identifies strongly with neither party, is far, far removed from the Democratic quarter.

As I noted earlier, this was not always the case. You may recall that just over three decades ago the Democratic liberal agenda was overwhelmingly popular and dominated the American political scene. Why, even Richard Nixon, the one Republican who broke the political dominance of the Democratic Party in those days, acquiesced to the prevailing liberalism on a good number of domestic policy issues, so much so that he is often referred to by political scientists, including the eminent Theodore Lowi, as "the last great Democratic president."

But the world changed and the nation evolved. The civil rights battle was an overwhelming success. The wars against poverty and hunger were largely won. The Vietnam War ended. And new, highly troubling issues presented themselves, many of which were consequential to the measures mentioned above.

Victory in the civil rights arena was so long overdue that most Americans made a concerted effort to ensure that the victory was absolute. And while such enthusiasm was welcomed, it also opened the door to a few who played upon the residual societal guilt to enhance their own stature and power. This permanent class of "grievance brokers," or what Oklahoma Congressman J.C. Watts described as "race-hustling poverty pimps," steered the movement far away from Reverend Martin Luther King's message of a colorblind society, and thus created a problem that needed to be addressed intelligently and with good will.

The victory over the kind of poverty and malnutrition that spurred President Johnson to launch the Great Society programs promoted a culture of dependence and illegitimacy, a problem that needed to be addressed intelligently and with good will.

The loss of the war in Vietnam created a dangerous schism within the American foreign policy establishment, a problem that needed to be addressed intelligently and with good will.

And in each of these and a host of similar cases, the Democrats continued to fight the old fights rather than addressing the new ones intelligently and with good will. And slowly they slipped into what looks to be a permanent minority status.

Mark and I have written many times that the Democrats are the “new reactionaries;” that they are now the ones who are, to borrow a phrase from William F. Buckley “standing athwart history yelling Stop.” To the Democratic Party elite, it is still 1968, and they alone still represent the hopes and dreams of Americans, and their old programs, schemes, and plans are both still necessary and still effective. Hence, the time warp.

But this is not the worst of it. For while this inability to change and adapt is obviously debilitating, it could be overcome. But this would only be possible if Democrats would honestly evaluate the progress they have promoted, the failures they have caused, and the changes that have taken place as a result of both. And such an evaluation simply cannot take place so long as the party’s leaders continue to believe the lies they’ve told themselves to make their fall from grace less painful.

But instead of attempting to ascertain why it is that they’ve been losing power, as one might expect a rational political party to do, the Democratic leaders have chosen instead to spin their losses, shifting the blame for their slide from power to mysterious and sinister forces at work within the GOP. It’s not us, they claim, but a “vast right wing conspiracy” launched by those devious Republicans who have figured out how to exploit the fears and hatreds of voters, thereby dragging them away from our noble, fair, enlightened, and progressive agenda.

And while I have no problem with political spin in general, and appreciate the need to keep the base motivated, the Democrats are playing a dangerous game. Getting others to believe spin is one thing, but believing it yourself is something else altogether, which is what the Democrats appear to be doing on a whole host of issues.

Take, for example, what has happened to the party in the South. Clearly there is some significant disconnect between Democratic and Southern sensibilities on a variety of issues, including religion, foreign policy, support for the military, taxes, and the proper role of the federal government. But rather than admit that perhaps their policies have come to be more and more distasteful to Southern voters, Democratic leaders have instead decided that it is Southern voters that are distasteful.

You see, in the minds of Democratic leaders, the reason that Republicans have gained a majority in the South is because all white Southerners are racists, and Republicans appeal to those racist tendencies, both overtly and in code. That’s why, as former President Bill Clinton so kindly reminded us all last year, the GOP was so upset with Trent Lott for his comments at Strom Thurmond’s birthday party. Lott, Clinton noted, simply said “in Washington what they [Republicans] do on the back roads every day.” As the editors of *The Wall Street Journal* put it last Friday, Democrats’ “conceit – fed by the Yankee media – is that it’s all about race. National

Democrats claim to believe they lose in the South because white men especially won't vote for civil rights liberals. They chalk it all up to their own moral superiority."

And once again we confront the time warp. *The Journal's* editors continue, "But if this was once true for a while during the 1960s, it stopped being true a long time ago." Indeed, "the South has made enormous civil-rights progress, to the point where recent Census data show there is a great migration of black Americans now taking place from the North back *to the South*. And far from playing the race card, most Republican candidates nowadays strive to avoid making race an issue . . ." Apparently, though, Democratic leaders don't believe that they should let reality ruin a perfectly good smear.

Similar cases can be made on a variety of other issues, from abortion to religion and everything in between. Democrats are floundering badly, in large part because they continue to wage war against enemies that haven't existed for decades.

Remember that two weeks ago, Mark noted that the Pro-Life crowd has taken the upper hand in the abortion debate *and has won over the minds of a majority of Americans* in large part because it has been willing to be flexible and accept progress wherever it can, even if that progress is merely incremental. The Pro-Choice crowd, in contrast, has remained ever obstinate, unwilling to give even an inch for fear that to do so would be to accede to "turning back the clock" to the phallogocentric world of white male oppression.

And just to make sure that no one misses their point on this matter, the new web site for NARAL Pro-Choice America, www.prochoiceamerica.org presents a "special screen" bringing "urgent news about a woman's right to choose," and featuring a picture of President Bush smiling as he signed the partial-birth ban last week. He is, naturally, backed by five white male members of Congress, including, among others, Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert.

So while the rest of America has moved on and has determined partial birth to be an exceptionally grizzly and heinous way to end a pregnancy, the Democrats and their pressure groups are still fighting the battles of the late '60s, tilting at windmills that haven't existed in some thirty years, if they ever existed at all.

Even on more minor, less ideological matters, Democrats have fallen into the habit of creating and then, apparently, believing implausible spin. After the California recall, for example, Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe declared that his guy's unprecedented bouncing from office was actually a warning to President Bush, because the electorate was clearly ready to take on any and all incumbent executives who had trouble with large budget deficits.

Then, last week, after McAuliffe's party again performed rather poorly, the Democratic Governors Association mouthpiece, Washington Governor Gary Locke, reprised the tune, noting an "anti-incumbent mood," declaring that, "National Republicans should take no joy in what was really a vote to change the status quo. This is an unsettled electorate looking for change, and that mood is likely to linger through next year's presidential election."

Now, the Democrats can blab all they want about anti-incumbent moods, but as *Opinion Journal's* James Taranto pointed out last week:

While it's true that the majority of the 40 states that elected governors between 2001 and this week switched parties, the GOP defeated five times as many incumbents as the Dems did.

Of the 12 races in which the Democrats picked up previously Republican-held governorships, 11 were for open seats – that is, the Republican incumbent was retiring and did not appear on the ballot. The sole exception is Wisconsin, where the Republican incumbent, Scott McCallum, had never been elected to the statehouse but succeeded Gov. Tommy Thompson in 2001 when the latter left Madison to become secretary of health and human services.

By contrast, Republicans picked off Democratic incumbents in five states: Alabama, California, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina. In all these cases, the losing governors had been duly elected four years earlier (or in California's case 11 months earlier).

Anyway, while I could go on here for a while, I think the point has been made. The Democratic Party has a problem. It is losing its connection with a majority of voters on a majority of issues. And to compound this problem, party leaders have made it a practice to deceive themselves as to why this is so.

Democrats are fond of claiming that if it hadn't been for September 11 and the subsequent "War on Terror," George W. Bush would be packing his bags now, preparing to leave the White House in 14 months. The attack and the war, they claim, saved a foundering presidency.

Frankly, I doubt that. Indeed, if weren't for the possibility that Bush could still screw things up in Iraq, I wouldn't give the Democrats any chance at all of winning back the White House. As long as they continue to ignore the realities of the American electorate and to mislead themselves with the myth of their moral superiority, Democrats are, in my opinion, unlikely to beat any reasonable Republican, be that George W. Bush in '04 or John Ellis Bush in '08 and '12. To quote Georgia Democrat Zell Miller, the Democrats are indeed "a national party no more."

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