

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

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: `Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear --
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
--*Ozymandias*, Percy Bysshe Shelley

SCORE A BIG ONE FOR BUSH, PART II. It is early Sunday morning as I sit down to write this. I awoke a short time ago to learn that U.S. forces have captured Saddam Hussein. His disheveled image is being shown repeatedly on television, along with pictures of Iraqis celebrating in the streets, all interspersed between interviews with a vast array of experts and pundits giving their views as to what it all means.

Everyone seems to agree that it is very good news. I share that opinion. From one perspective, of course, it shouldn't make any difference. After all, it turns out that Saddam was spending his days in hiding, dirty and unshaven, fearing to creep out even long enough to shower and shave. Certainly he was not a major leader of the insurgency movement. But the fact is that his capture is an extremely important event in both the war in Iraq and the greater war against terrorism, for even if he were totally uninvolved in the day-to-day Iraqi resistance, the very fact that he was alive and free was of immense symbolic importance to America's enemies.

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

To the Iraqi people, as well as to much of the Arab world, Saddam was an almost mythical figure, larger than life, an *Übermensch*, the only Arab leader to stand proudly and unafraid, *will to will*, army to army, against the great military might of the United States.

And now he's been captured, while hiding in a hole in the ground like a rabbit. Captured without a fight. His pistol silent. Displayed on television, for the world to see, having the lice picked from his hair by an American soldier, who is seen peering into his mouth as an Arab trader would do to an aging camel. Defeated by George Bush, a man who is widely portrayed by militant Islamists around the world as the soft, weak, cowardly head of a nation that is prone to cut and run when the going gets tough. A Christian.

The killing of Americans in Iraq will go on, of course. Indeed, attacks are likely to escalate in the weeks ahead. But the message sent to the opposition groups by the capture of Saddam is the same one that was sent by the U.S. Congress when it recently approved the expenditure of \$87 billion to continue the Iraqi effort for another year. To borrow some words from an article about that vote, entitled "Score a Big One for Bush," which appeared in the October 20 issue of this newsletter, that message is that any hopes the insurgents might have had that the United States was about to throw in the towel were illusionary, and that they face at least another year of guerrilla war against a technologically superior enemy that grows stronger each day.

I remain highly skeptical of Bush's grandiose plans to establish a democratic government in Iraq, and even more skeptical of his dream of spreading democracy throughout the Middle East. But I've beaten that horse many times in these pages and it is not necessary to beat it again this week. The point this week is that the capture of Saddam is another giant step toward a successful conclusion to the American effort in Iraq. And that is cause for celebration. In the months ahead, I think we will witness more positive developments in Iraq, perhaps not as dramatic as the capture of Saddam, but significant nevertheless.

I believe, for example, that more and more ordinary Iraqis will now recognize and subscribe to the twin tenets of the American promise to them; first, that the future belongs to those citizens who join the American-led effort to rebuild their country, and second, that the quicker this effort is successful, the quicker they will gain control of the levers of government along with the vast oil wealth that lies beneath them.

I also believe that many nations that have been antagonistic toward U.S. efforts in Iraq will now begin to realize that George Bush is highly likely to be the President of the United States for another five years, and that in light of this unsettling fact, it might be a good idea to begin to mend a few fences with him.

AL ENDORSES . . . WAR ON THE CLINTONS. Last week, when Al Gore announced his endorsement of Howard Dean for the Democratic presidential nomination (and presumably for President as well), the explanations of why the former Vice President would get behind Dean so early and so vocally ranged from the painfully lame to the cynically insightful.

CNN's Bill Schneider wins first prize in the "painfully lame" category with his claim that Gore is a team player and that he undoubtedly wants to do all he can to ensure that his team wins. Top prize in the second, "cynically insightful" category goes to David Frum, with his contention that

Gore, like Hillary, needs his party to lose, and lose “catastrophically,” in ’04, so that he can ride to the rescue in ’08.

And while many of the explanations offered, with the exception of Schneider’s, contain at least a kernel of truth, none that I’ve seen tells the story in its entirety. Yes, Gore still wants to be President, and yes, he wants to run again in ’08. But his endorsement of Dean is about much more than keeping hope alive for another campaign. It’s about control of the Democratic Party. It’s not about Al and Hillary thinking along similar lines, it’s about Al and Hillary wanting the exact same thing, and knowing that only one can have it.

Three months ago, when Bill and Hillary pushed their friend Wesley Clark into the primary campaign in hopes of weakening the Dean camp, they fired the first, admittedly rather feeble salvo in the battle for the party’s future. Last Tuesday, Al Gore fired back.

Back in September, upon Clark’s entry into the race, I wrote that that the General was, above all else, the Clintons transparent attempt to halt Howard Dean’s palpable momentum; to wrest the nomination from the little fella’s hands, and, thereby, prevent him from defenestrating the Clinton crowd from the party headquarters and replacing them with people of Dean’s choosing. Specifically, I wrote:

I think she [Hillary] and Bill want to keep Dean from winning the nomination not solely because they fear he could win the general election, but because they fear the power that the nomination would bring him within the Democratic Party establishment at their expense.

A large part of the reason that Bill and Hillary Clinton remain immeasurably important to the Party, nearly three years after Bill left the White House, is their ability to raise money. Indeed, over the last twenty years or so, no one in the Party has been able to raise money like they, and lately, no one has been able to do so without them. Nobody, until Dean, that is.

Howard Dean has been propelled into the lead in most polls in part because he has managed to tap into the anger that boils in many of the party’s activists. But more importantly, his success rests on the fact that he is the only candidate thus far to raise serious money. And not only has he raised cash hand-over-fist, but he’s done so without the help of either the Clintons or the traditional party machine. And thus, he has made himself a serious threat not just to Joe Lieberman and John Kerry but to Bill and Hillary’s future plans as well.

Nothing bears out this contention as well as the low profile but extremely important squabbling between Dean and the party’s official leadership. Dean has made little secret of the fact that he wants Terry McAuliffe, the Clintons’ longtime friend, perennial bagman, and extraordinary mortgage banker, out as the head of the Democratic National Committee, which he could certainly do as the Party’s nominee.

This would mean that not only are the Clintons no longer the party’s sole successful fundraisers, but that they no longer pull the levers at the Party headquarters.

Well, it turns out we're not the only ones who get this. And now that Dean appears a virtual shoe-in to clinch the nomination, when he does inevitably boot the Clintonistas out on their keesters, Al wants to be the guy whispering in the ear of the plenty charismatic and plenty angry but incredibly inexperienced Doctor.

SAT scores (lower than GWB's) and Divinity schools grades (0.7/4.00 GPA) notwithstanding, Al Gore's not stupid. He knows very well that if the Clintons manage to retain some power, either by figuring out a way to hurt Dean ("opposition research," I believe they call it) or by withstanding, even in some small way, his certain assault, they will be the party's fallback option, and Hillary will be the frontrunner for the party's nomination in '08. And if he plans to have any political future at all (and he almost certainly does), then he can't let that happen.

What surprises me about this is that Gore apparently has a bit more guts than I, or the overwhelming preponderance of the collective punditry had guessed. By endorsing Dean, Gore has not just broken with Bill and Hillary ideologically, but he has broken with them personally. Moreover, he has directly challenged them and their legacy, something I didn't think he'd have the gumption to do. After all, you don't have to be a conspiracy nut or a "Clinton-hater" to know that people who cross Bill and Hill generally do not fair very well for very long, a fact that Al witnessed up close for eight years.

Consequently, Gore's endorsement was a very serious gamble. And now the wild card in the game is the how the Clintons will respond. They must do something, and it must be fairly dramatic, because their old pal Al has put them in a tight spot.

FOB extraordinaire Terry McCauliffe has already indicated that he will step down as chairman of the DNC at the end of 2004, which is, in my opinion, a fairly obvious attempt to avoid earlier dismissal by Dean. But with Gore whispering in Dean's ear, it's seems unlikely that this preeminent Clintonista will be spared until after the election. Al will almost certainly tell the good Doctor that he needs his own guy in the slot, and that he, his new pal Al, will even help pick the right guy, kind of like Dick Cheney running the screening process for GWB's running mate in '00. Bill and Hillary will have to do something either to preempt this usurpation by the Dean-Gore axis or to ensure that somehow that axis is discredited by a loss next November.

Now, I don't have any idea how Bill and Hill will do any of this, but if I had to bet, I'd put my money on them. Hillary Clinton is ten times the politician Al Gore is, and neither is fit even to be mentioned in the same breath with uber-politician Bill. Gore may have won this first battle via sneak attack, but I can't imagine that he'll last long in a war with the Clintons. When they strike back, they'll hit hard.

The funny thing about all of this is that Joe Lieberman is the one Democrat, other than those directly involved, who seems to understand what's going on here. Immediately after Gore's announcement, he declared that this election is a battle for the very soul of the Democratic Party and that his former running mate had just enlisted on the wrong side. Joe is right, of course. But one has to wonder if he has any idea that while he is on the opposite side from Gore, he too is on the wrong side from the Clintons, which is a bad place for an ambitious Democrat to be.

OVERCONFIDENT, MY FOOT. It has become fashionable on the political right of late to suggest that Howard Dean is a serious person whose candidacy should not be taken lightly, and that the delight many GOP operatives have shown at the possibility of facing Dean in the general election is entirely misplaced and potentially destructive.

Presidential Advisor Karl Rove in particular has been the object of much concern and hand-wringing for comments he allegedly made last summer about how Dean is “the one we want,” implying that he believes a match-up with the former Vermont Governor would result in a cakewalk for his boss. Such an attitude, it is suggested, is disconnected from political realities and holds the potential to allow overconfidence to derail the President’s re-election effort.

While I will concede that nothing is assured, that eleven months is a long time in which a lot can happen, and that Republican politicians have made bigger messes before, I can’t help but feel that it is actually these hand-wringers who are disconnected from reality. Howard Dean is an angry, cantankerous man who may well prove to be precisely the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time for the Democrats. I am loathe to make any detailed predictions this far from election day, but I will say that it would not surprise me one bit if come next November the initial GOP reaction to Dean, that of bemusement and brusque dismissal, is vindicated by a blowout of McGovern-esque proportion.

Dean, as most people already know, has built his candidacy on two overarching beliefs: that George W. Bush has the worst economic record of any president since Hoover, and that the war in Iraq is a dreadful failure based on a series of lies. Already, circumstances have shown the first belief to be ridiculous at best, and it appears more and more that the second will be proven equally preposterous before next November.

Even setting aside yesterday’s capture of Saddam, the Iraq campaign has been trending in Bush’s favor for the past several weeks. A couple of months ago, Mark offered the administration a little unsolicited advice, suggesting that Americans would be more willing to tolerate the deaths of their young men and women in Iraq, if they could be re-convinced that such losses were the cost of protecting our national security. Electricity for Basra, no. Protecting American men, women, and children, yes.

Since then, the administration appears to have taken Mark’s suggestions to heart, going back on the tactical offensive and making both rhetorical and empirical arguments that national security is, as the President initially said it was, the nation’s principle aim in Iraq.

Last Sunday, in a little noticed piece in the London *Telegraph*, we were given but a glimpse of what I believe is part of this greater Bush strategy to reassert the national security case for the war. The piece was an interview with Lt. Colonel al-Dabbagh of the Iraqi army who, it turns out, was the British government’s principal source for its controversial claim that Saddam possessed chemical and biological weapons that could be launched against coalition forces on 45-minutes notice. And it was, in my opinion, the type of story we can expect to see much more often in the coming months, particularly now that Saddamite regime is incontrovertibly gone forever. According to the *Telegraph*:

Lt-Col al-Dabbagh, 40, who was the head of an Iraqi air defence unit in the western desert, said that cases containing WMD warheads were delivered to front-line units, including his own, towards the end of last year. He said they were to be used by Saddam's Fedayeen paramilitaries and units of the Special Republican Guard when the war with coalition troops reached "a critical stage". The containers, which came from a number of factories on the outskirts of Baghdad, were delivered to the army by the Fedayeen and were distributed to the front-line units under cover of darkness.

He also insisted that the information contained in the dossier relating to Saddam's battlefield WMD capability was correct. "It is 100 per cent accurate," he said after reading the relevant passage. The devices, which were known by Iraqi officers as "the secret weapon", were made in Iraq and designed to be launched by hand-held rocket-propelled grenades. They could also have been launched sooner than the 45-minutes claimed in the dossier.

"Forget 45 minutes," said Col al-Dabbagh "we could have fired these within half-an-hour." Local commanders were told that they could use the weapons only on the personal orders of Saddam. "We were told that when the war came we would only have a short time to use everything we had to defend ourselves, including the secret weapon," he said.

And while there is, of course, no independent confirmation of Col. Al-Dabbagh's contentions, I suspect that with Saddam now officially a bad memory for the Iraqis, there will be others with similar stories to tell. Indeed, just yesterday, the *Telegraph* ran another little-noticed story that, while on a different subject, is nonetheless in a similar vein. To wit:

Iraq's coalition government claims that it has uncovered documentary proof that Mohammed Atta, the al-Qaeda mastermind of the September 11 attacks against the US, was trained in Baghdad by Abu Nidal, the notorious Palestinian terrorist.

Details of Atta's visit to the Iraqi capital in the summer of 2001, just weeks before he launched the most devastating terrorist attack in US history, are contained in a top secret memo written to Saddam Hussein, the then Iraqi president, by Tahir Jalil Habbush al-Tikriti, the former head of the Iraqi Intelligence Service.

The handwritten memo, a copy of which has been obtained exclusively by the *Telegraph*, is dated July 1, 2001 and provides a short resume of a three-day "work programme" Atta had undertaken at Abu Nidal's base in Baghdad.

In the memo, Habbush reports that Atta "displayed extraordinary effort" and demonstrated his ability to lead the team that would be "responsible for attacking the targets that we have agreed to destroy."

Again, it is important to remember that this is unconfirmed information. If it can somehow be confirmed, though, it, like the aforementioned WMD story, would be great news for the United States, great news for Tony Blair, great news for George W. Bush, and absolutely dreadful news for Howard Dean and the Democratic Party he appears increasingly likely to represent in next

year's election. I've said all along that Dean and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party have made a serious tactical error by focusing so heavily on Iraq. This is one of the more important reasons why.

One of the things the Democrats appear to have forgotten is that no matter how much they may think they know about Iraq and its WMDs, and its possible connections to al-Qaeda, George Bush and his team know more – a lot more. Right now the Democrats think they've got Bush on the ropes because, in their opinion, he looks dishonest in what he said about Saddam and Iraq in the buildup to the war. But if (or, I suspect, when) the evidence of Saddam's threat to the United States begins to trickle out, it will be they who look dishonest, and more than just a bit foolish.

Additionally, one of things that the “hand-wringers” appear to have forgotten is that Karl Rove didn't exactly fall off the turnip truck yesterday. He is considered one of this country's smartest and most able political strategists because he *is* one of this country's smartest and most able political strategists. And if he's borderline giddy about the idea of facing Dean, I'd be inclined to believe that he has excellent reasons for being so. With Dean so far out on the proverbial limb on Iraq, it will not take much to snap his branch and send him crashing back to the ground.

Once more, I'll note that I'm extremely reluctant to make specific predictions about an election that's still just shy of a year away. But if I had to guess at what Rove is doing, I'd say he's probably trying to set Dean and the Democrats up for an early fall that would both fuel hopes for a blowout and aid Congressional Republicans in their quest to solidify and expand their majorities. To hell with the “October Surprise,” if the Bush team can produce a surprise in the form of WMD proof or al-Qaeda links just after the Democrats have officially committed to Dean this spring, then the race will be over before it's begun. They'll bury him early.

Saddam was a bad guy. And Howard Dean's big mistake was forgetting that. If he is indeed, the Democratic nominee, I suspect he'll pay dearly for that mistake, whether Karl Rove and the rest of Team Bush are a little overconfident or not.

And if Dean sticks to his current line on Iraq, then it will be nigh on impossible for the Bush team actually to be overconfident, for Dean will quickly become the guy about whom George McGovern and Walter Mondale, who between them won all of *two* states, will chuckle and call a truly dreadful nominee.

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