

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

Oh, there's nothing halfway about the Iowa way to treat you
when we treat you which we may not do at all.
There's an Iowa kind of special chip-on-the-shoulder attitude
We've never been without that we recall

We can be cold as a falling thermometer in December
if you ask about our weather in July.
And we're so by-God stubborn we can stand touchin' noses
for a week at a time and never see eye-to-eye.

But what the heck, you're welcome. Join us at the picnic.
You can have your fill of all the food you bring yourself.
You really ought to give Iowa a try. (Provided you are contrary.)

But, we'll give you our shirt and a back to go with it
If your crops should happen to die.
So what the heck, you're welcome. Glad to have you with us
Even though we may not ever mention it again.
You really ought to give Iowa a try.

--"The Music Man," Meredith Wilson

IOWA CAUCUS REPORT: A TOUCH OF SANITY. As a native Nebraskan, as well as a conservative Republican, I am generally loath to say nice things about either Iowans or Democrats. But last night, the Democrats of Iowa, in a bright and shining evening of reason and common sense, did their very best to halt what Mark, who *is* a native Iowan, and I have often described in these pages as the Democratic Party's recent descent into madness.

Now, neither of us is a fan of John Kerry. But we certainly recognize that he is a solid member of the Democratic Party establishment, and a fixture in the political center of his party. As such, he is one of the few good choices, among a host of bad choices, to carry the Democrats' banner against George Bush next November. And to demonstrate that it was not a fluke when Iowa

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Democrats had the good judgment to give him their support, they chose another of their Party's centrists for second place, the mild mannered John Edwards.

In fact, although Kerry won the event and has now dubbed himself "Comeback Kerry," in my opinion Edwards delivered the most impressive performance. In the aftermath speeches, Kerry showed himself to be both longwinded and vainglorious. Edwards, in contrast, was brief, buoyant, and, dare I say it, mildly charismatic. Both have momentum going into New Hampshire, but Edwards's is more unexpected, and therefore more interesting.

Of course, in real life, where there are winners there are also losers. *Washington Times* editor-in-chief Wesley Pruden did the best job of describing this aspect of the race when he wrote last Friday that it now appears that "those battered body parts strewn along the side of the road may not be John Kerry's after all." In fact, they are the remains of the Iowa campaigns of Dick Gephardt and Howard Dean.

On the surface, at least, Gephardt would appear to have suffered the worst defeat. However, although he dropped out of the presidential race and is retiring from Congress, it is not a foregone conclusion that he is out of politics forever. After listening to his speech last night, I now think it is entirely possible that he is angling for the Vice President's slot. Though he is generally a decent guy and his speech may simply have been in keeping with his character, I couldn't help but think that there was something more to it, that it was too conciliatory, and promised too much by way of party solidarity.

In any case, he would be a good choice as a running mate for the eventual winner. He is personable, articulate, and well informed, but not overpowering. He is good on the stump. His liberal credentials are excellent. He has a great deal of experience in government, and thus could presumably handle the presidency if he were thrust into the job by tragedy. He has, to the best of my knowledge, no significant skeletons in his closet. And he's well liked in the all-important battleground of the mid-West.

Gephardt also has excellent connections to organized labor. And while this didn't help him much in Iowa, where farmers are more interested in free trade than in Gephardt's so-called "fair trade," no Democratic candidate can win the general election without the money and grass roots support of organized labor, which he can deliver.

Thus, it may turn out that Howard Dean was even a bigger loser than Gephardt. If Dean's problem in Iowa was that he gave the impression of being a little nuts, he did nothing to dispel that notion with last night's red-faced, jaw-clenched shout-fest, which was as petty and foolish as Gephardt's was magnanimous and mollifying. Indeed, while many who know Dean well think that his "angry guy" routine is just an act, one could be forgiven for wondering if, after last night's speech, what began as political theatre has become a true psychological problem.

So, what's next? Well, the New Hampshire primary is on Monday, and though Kerry has gained some momentum, I will be a little surprised if he wins. To do so, he will have to overtake not just Dean, but Wesley Clark as well. And while that's possible, I think it's a bit of a stretch. Remember that Clark, who until yesterday was the anti-Dean *du jour*, sat out Iowa specifically to focus his efforts on New Hampshire, and, as of this morning, Dean still leads in the polls there.

Over the next few days and, depending on the results of the New Hampshire race, over the next several weeks, look for attacks on Kerry to increase dramatically, primarily from right-leaning pundits and columnists. For a long time, Dean was the primary target of this crowd. But when it became clear that Clark was emerging as the media's anointed "anti-Dean," he became the principal foil, and it became part of the lore that he was just as crazy as Dean, if not more so. They'll have a tough time making Kerry look as nutty as those two, but they'll either give it a shot or find something else about him to lampoon.

One interesting emerging storyline is that the February 3 primary in South Carolina could turn Al Sharpton into a major player in the race, either as a kingmaker or spoiler. In 2000, George W. stopped the McCain bandwagon in South Carolina. This year, South Carolina will be John Edwards' best hope of derailing Kerry, Dean, or Clark, whichever of them wins New Hampshire. Yet, it is entirely possible that Edwards will not win South Carolina; that it will instead go to Sharpton, who can be expected to garner an overwhelming majority of the state's black votes.

In 1988, Jesse Jackson won South Carolina on his way to winning a handful of Southern states. And Sharpton is proving himself to be a far superior politician to Jackson. If Sharpton can make a strong showing on Feb. 3, he could not only spoil the day for Edwards, but he could then broker his support among black voters in the South to any one of the other candidates. If that happens, one thing is certain: the candidate whom Sharpton supports will not be Howard Dean.

And that brings us back to the central plot of this unfolding drama, namely, the battle to restore a sense of sanity to the Democratic Party. Until yesterday, there was only one army on the field. Today, the centrist Democratic establishment is fighting back, thanks to the bravery of a regiment of Iowa regulars.

But don't count the crazies out yet. Dean still has money and energy and the backing of a very large, irregular army of nutcases. And while Iowa's Democrats are often categorized as "among the most liberal in the country," they are still Iowans, with all the Midwestern good sense that entails. Iowans may have rejected Dean and the Moveon.com crowd, but rest assured that the Deaniac forces will make a concerted effort to regroup on less hostile soil. By some accounts these hearty soldiers of the absurd constitute close to half of the nation's Democratic voters, and a much higher percentage in some key states such as California and New York.

And though Kerry is currently the leader of the forces of sanity, there is always the strong possibility that he will defect to the other side. As anyone who has watched him closely in recent months knows, he has certainly flirted with the loony left on many occasions and is hardly above altering his positions to suit the mood of his would-be followers. It should be noted that he could do this without embracing the Dean crowd fully. At present, the Democratic Party has many potential pockets of severe neuroses.

As noted above, for example, Wesley Clark is also a serious competitor for the nutcase vote, even though, having been a *General* and all, he cannot hope to tap into the madness of all the anti-warriors. Nevertheless, he does appear to have discovered a different, though related support group. It is well documented that Clark misses no opportunity on the stump to blame the war in Iraq and the general direction of the War on Terror on the dreaded "neocon" conspiracy.

And as has been well documented, in these pages and elsewhere, the term “neocon” is often used by those on the far left and the far right interchangeably with “Jews.”

Now, we’d be willing to listen to Clark’s defense of the use of the term as something other than anti-Semitic if it weren’t for a strange and potentially telling question that appears on ForClark.com, an official campaign web site. As *OpinionJournal’s* James Taranto reports, the site poses a series of questions, one which asks, “Would Lyndon LaRouche make a good Treasury Secretary?”

This is, to put it bluntly, truly amazing. It is the equivalent of a Republican presidential candidate asking, “Would David Duke make a good Secretary of the Interior?”

LaRouche, like Clark, is a big believer in theories about a neocon cabal directing the Bush administration’s actions. But unlike Clark, who proudly proclaims his Jewish roots, LaRouche does not mince words about who these “neocons” are and why they are manipulating the U.S. government. LaRouche is, in short, an unapologetic anti-Semite.

Clark should not only be ashamed of himself for even mentioning a man like LaRouche on an official campaign web site, but he should be careful that he doesn’t get too involved in nuttiness associated with the neocon conspiracy buffs. As noted above, Dean has shown that political theater can quickly turn into real mental problems, and Clark, whose theater is every bit as crazy as Dean’s, should heed that lesson.

But anyway, the moment belongs not to Dean or Clark and their fellow crazies, but to Kerry, Edwards, and the forces of sanity. One can only hope that Kerry has the good sense to watch his step around the nuts.

THE POLITICS OF IMMIGRATION. For a couple of weeks now, various and sundry conservative pundits, policy makers, and pressure group leaders have been walking around Washington mumbling under their breath about what a jerk President Bush is. They say he has crossed “his base” for the last time; that there will be real and serious consequences this time; that conservative donors will shut off the proverbial spigots and make plans to be “otherwise engaged” on November 2; and that their trust was violated when Bush proposed an immigration plan that would provide “amnesty lite” for several million employed immigrants in this country illegally.

This is not, I should note, the first time these folks have been so deeply troubled. Recall that throughout the summer of 2001, the Bush administration floated trial balloons about amnesty. And then, as now, many conservatives howled that Bush was making a mistake, both in terms of policy and politics, and would upset his base so badly that they’d certainly never love him again.

Naturally, any plans for dramatically altering the immigration status quo were shelved after September 11. But now, the President apparently feels comfortable that the issue may again be broached. And this select group of unhappy conservatives feels that they may once again demagogue and manipulate it. As Yogi Berra once said, it is like *déjà vu* all over again.

There are two questions with which to deal on this issue, one covering the political side of the debate, and the other covering the matter of policy. Let me address the politics first.

It is not unusual for various conservative factions to grow unhappy with the president and threaten to withdraw support for him. “Alienating the base” has been a constant theme throughout the George W. Bush presidency. In a coalition as diverse as the GOP’s, it is hardly unusual that one group or another would be upset at any given time and threaten not to vote for the party in the next election.

That said, immigration is substantively different on this score than, say, overspending and deficits. Though most Americans, conservative, liberal, or otherwise, could care less about deficits, and almost never vote based on such considerations, immigration is a different beast altogether. Voters, particularly those in states with serious problems related to illegal immigration, tend to take the issue seriously. Thus, this really is an issue that could, at least in theory, alienate enough of Bush’s base to make it more difficult for him to win re-election.

Nevertheless, I am dubious that such a mutiny is in the offing. As is usually the case, I suspect that the conservative elites here in Washington are more upset than are rank-and-file voters out in the hustings. While Bush may, in the eyes of some segments of the base, be a profligate spender, or, as in this case, soft on immigration, he is right on the two issues that matter most to conservative voters, taxes and national security.

Additionally, Bush still has the ability to do things that will please the base to no end, like, for example, giving Judge Charles Pickering a recess appointment, which is a huge slab of proverbial red meat for conservatives who view the Pickering nomination as one of the focal points of the battle against liberal-Democratic obstructionism.

At this point, most conservatives still appear to believe that it would be incredibly irresponsible to do anything to damage Bush’s chances, and thereby help hand the reins of power over to someone who is, in their opinion, flat wrong on taxes, national security, and the state of the federal judiciary. On the issue of immigration, Bush cannot simply take his base for granted. But he will be given considerable leeway, all the bitching and moaning notwithstanding.

On the policy side of the question, critiques of Bush’s plan have ranged from asinine, to thoughtful, to reasonably persuasive. Many conservatives are unhappy that Bush’s plan will reward lawbreakers, thus making a mockery of federal immigration laws. Others suggest that the plan is a slap in the face to all law-abiding immigrants, and actually punishes those who played by the rules while rewarding those who broke the law. Still others, including classics professor and military historian Victor Davis Hanson, suggest that the plan, while well-intentioned will simply be a failure.

And while all such critiques contain some kernel of truth, each of them misses some fairly important political realities. First, there are between eight and eleven million illegal immigrants in this country, and they are not going to go away. Politically, the government could not deport them, even if it wished to do so and even if the INS could round them all up. They have jobs; they have families; and whether Bush offers them amnesty (or amnesty lite, if you prefer) or not, they’re going to continue to live their lives in the United States. And unless something is done to

bring them within the folds of legitimate society, they are going to live on the fringes, unprotected by the legal and social safety nets.

Thus, like it or not, the current law already represents a mockery of justice, if for no other reason than the fact that the word “illegal” has no apparent legal meaning, as is demonstrated each time there is a public debate over what should be a simple question, i.e., what to do with “illegals?”

Second, and perhaps most important, the nation needs immigrant labor. Many who are opposed to Bush’s plan have argued that the United States has plenty of native-born workers who will fill in for any illegals that are removed. And while that may be the case today, it will definitely not be so in the near future. The demographic realities of modern, post-industrialist societies are such that unless the United States continues to supplement the native-born population with immigrants, it is looking at a pretty bleak economic future.

And it is here that Bush’s plan makes the greatest sense. All industrialized nations, as well as China, face serious demographic challenges related to low birth rates and associated population “graying.” In Western Europe and Japan in particular, the problem is acute and becoming more so with every passing year. And of all these graying nations, only the United States has a large, near-by immigrant population that is similar enough culturally to facilitate relatively easy assimilation, along with the luxury of being able to negotiate on a friendly basis the terms of the immigration exchange with the “exporting” country.

Now, there is no question that President Bush’s proposal has some serious flaws and raises some troubling questions. But it should be remembered that the proposal is, in a very real sense, a first draft. Congress will have significant input, and the final product will almost certainly look different from the one the administration unveiled two weeks ago.

In addition to the complaints noted above, Conservative critics are unhappy because they think this is part of a cynical ploy on Bush’s part to attract Latino votes in November, which they believe is a lost cause. They are also upset because original, pre-9/11 versions of this plan required Mexico to make considerable contributions to the effort, most notably by dissuading illegal immigration. Now, though, Mexican President Vicente Fox has been required to promise nothing in return.

I believe they are wrong on both counts. Just watch. Before all is said and done, Fox will do his part to help Bush make the immigration program work. Bush left him in the lurch the first time around and he is correct to ask for Bush to go first this time. But he will help when the time comes, both to help make the new law work and to help Bush with his reelection campaign. Bush may, indeed, be politically courageous for proposing this plan during an election year. But he is also pretty darned politically savvy.

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