

# 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

“Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character . . .

Emotivism has become embodied in our culture. But of course in saying this I am not merely contending that morality is not what it once was, but also and more importantly that what once was morality has to some large degree disappeared - and that this marks a degeneration, a grave cultural loss.”

--*After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre.

**THE ORIGINS OF MODERN POLITICAL HATRED.** Last week, Steve and I had dinner with a good friend and client who asked us why we thought Democrats hate President Bush so much. The answer that both of us gave had to do with their reaction to suddenly finding that they are members of the nation’s permanent minority party. And while there is certainly some truth in this, upon thinking it over later, I decided that that was far from a satisfactory answer. So I have written what I hope is a better, more thoughtful one.

For starters, I would note that it is not unusual for U.S. presidents to elicit strong feelings of hostility, particularly those who are in office during a time of crisis, such as Lincoln and FDR. But the extreme animosity that was directed at Bill Clinton from the right and that is now being directed at George Bush from the left represents something new in American politics, something which I think has its roots in the early 1960s.

It was during that time that the federal government began to get involved in a host of cultural issues that had not previously been at the forefront of national politics. I know I am speaking in generalities here, but “generally speaking,” I think it is safe to say that prior to the early 1960s, the social order in most states and communities across America was maintained with considerably less involvement by the federal government than is evident today.

I wouldn’t attempt to explain the exact mechanism of how the system worked back then without the heavy hand of Washington being omnipresent, but I know that movies during that time did not show men and women together in bed, even if they were married; “dirty words” were not

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spoken on radio or television, or even written in novels; and nudity was not allowed in movies, magazines, or on television. Public prayer and religious references were ubiquitous across America, in schools, civic meetings, governmental and court proceedings, and public holiday celebrations. Drug use was, by today's standards at least, rare, as were divorce, sexually transmitted diseases, and children killing children.

Sodomy was illegal. Abortions were illegal. Racial segregation laws were in force throughout the South, and discrimination against African-Americans was openly and unapologetically practiced in every state. Homosexuals were also openly discriminated against, and were routinely subjected to ridicule, often by public officials and community leaders. When contemplating their futures, young women were encouraged to confine their choices to housewife, nurse, teacher or secretary.

There were, of course, federal and state laws concerning all of these matters. But my impression is that the above described normative behavior was enforced as much by community approbrium as by legal dictum. In any case, the President rarely became involved in such issues. Certainly, no president considered them to be among the most burning political topics of the day.

In the early 1960s, things changed dramatically. Individuals and groups of individuals began challenging the status quo on a host of matters such as Jim Crow laws in the South, federal statutes concerning censorship, public displays of Christianity, and state restrictions on abortions.

The principal weapons they chose for this battle were a host of newly conceived interpretations of various clauses in the Constitution. Thus, the principal battlefield became the federal government and the federal courts. The principal tactic used by all groups pushing for change was to assert that they were on the side of such things as "universal justice" and the "fundamental rights of humanity." These grandiose appeals to a higher authority than mere government were designed to justify illegal activities occasionally and deliberately distorted judicial decisions routinely.

During the course of the subsequent, almost half-century period of revolutionary cultural warfare, the President of the United States became deeply involved with issues that had had little part in the daily concerns of President Eisenhower and his predecessors, and which were only beginning to enter the day to day consciousness of Jack Kennedy before his untimely death.

Lyndon Johnson was the first president to be up to his elbows in these fights. He assumed the role of the great paladin of liberal change almost from the first day of his presidency. And before he had left the White House six years later, he had signed a host of legislative initiatives that formed the legal foundation for the civil rights movement and the "war on poverty," which I believe can be accurately described as the two most revolutionary social movements that the United States had experienced since the abolition of slavery 100 years earlier.

From that point on, such hot button cultural issues as civil rights, affirmative action, abortion, gay rights, women's rights, separation of church and state, and pornography became important factors for voters across the land when considering their presidential choice. The result was that presidential politics took on a whole new dimension.

Victories for the forces of change have not come easily. But they have come, and they continue to come, and when they do they come hard and fast like a locomotive running down everything that gets in the way. Some of the changes that have occurred were exceptionally good and long overdue. I would argue, for example, that the civil rights movement was among the proudest accomplishments in the history of American democracy. And certainly, the undeniable, commonplace discrimination against gays and women needed to be addressed via the legal system. Some changes, however, such as abortion on demand, are still highly controversial, regarded today by many Americans as an unmitigated good, and by others as an abomination.

One inarguable fact is that the many cultural changes that have occurred during the four and half decades in question, even the most necessary and the most noble, have created social upheavals and political unrest. Several factors are involved in this. One is, as liberal icon Jeremy Bentham observed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that “every right which the law confers on one party, whether that party be an individual, a subordinate class of individuals, or the public, it thereby imposes on some other party a duty or obligation.”

Much has been written about the breakdown of the old social order that has occurred since the 1960s, so I won't dwell on specifics here, except to note that one of the consequences has been a steep decline in morality and in respect for the nation's traditional values. This has resulted in huge increases in such things as out-of-wedlock and teenage births, violent crime, single-parent families, teenage suicide and murder, divorce rates, drug use, and sexually transmitted diseases. Also, the public educational system has been in a steep decline, pornography has become a big business, and public discourse has coarsened dramatically.

One of the best descriptions of these trends appears in my old friend Claes Ryn's timeless classic, *The New Jacobins*, written in 1991. It contains the following observation.

Drug abuse is rampant. Sexual promiscuity is so common as to be considered almost normal and causes epidemics of venereal disease and AIDS. Abortions are performed in staggering numbers as a form of birth-control. The family is losing its cohesion and plays a much reduced role as transmitter of civilized values. Standards of personal behavior and deportment are falling. Old-fashioned honesty and integrity yield to shadiness and opportunism. Carelessness pushes out good workmanship. Commercialism is more and more obtrusive. Spending for consumption through borrowing is the order of the day both for individuals and government. The continual and substantial inflationary erosion of the currency, which sometimes halves its value in just a few years, shows the opportunism and cynicism of vote-buying politicians and the complicity of self-indulgent voters who want benefits without paying for them. In education, standards are low, and the ideological fads and nostrums of the day replace attention to the insights and achievements of the ages. At the same time, diversions from real problems and responsibilities are everywhere. Entertainment forms an increasingly prominent part of Western culture and plays a central role in breaking down lingering traditional tastes and inhibitions. In the arts, the incidence of the crude, the ugly, and the offensive illustrates a collapse of aesthetical judgment. The churches try to avoid the subjects of individual sin, repentance, and character and offer a largely sentimental message of “love” and “compassion.” Old distinctions between what is morally admirable and deplorable are radically challenged. Behaviors are accepted or

held up for emulation that once were considered abhorrent . . . The evidence of decline in today's Western democracies could be balanced against more encouraging signs, but these cannot remove the impression that a civilization is disintegrating, and not just at the periphery – but at its moral core . . . Today, a moral flabbiness permits flight from real, up-close problems and opportunities into moral posturing. While high-sounding and ambitious goals are professed, social conflict intensifies.

As I indicated earlier, one additional consequence of the monumental changes that have taken place during this period was that the President has become the most important combatant on the cultural battlefield, using the vast powers and resources of the federal establishment either to spur on the forces of change or to slow them down. And this position as the nation's leading cultural arbitrator has attracted a different kind of animosity than had been directed at presidents of earlier days; a hotter, more focused, more vehement kind of animosity; the kind that is common in conflicts that involve belief systems, tribal mores, values, and religious dogma.

This deep-seated animosity first became overwhelmingly evident among the conservative community during Bill Clinton's presidency, largely, I think, because he was "pushing the envelope" on the pace of change far beyond anything that conservatives had come to expect.

In fact, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan conservatives had begun to think that the tide of battle had begun to shift in favor of restraint. Evidence seemed to suggest that the aging baby boomers were not keen on having their kids lead a life of "sex, drugs and rock and roll," and were becoming more conservative in their politics. Religion seemed to be enjoying a rebound across the nation. Educators and politicians were discussing a return to "traditional values" as a means of addressing America's social ills. George Bush beat the ultra liberal Michael Dukakis, thus seeming to assure that American would remain on a somewhat conservative track.

And then came Bill Clinton, who claimed to be a moderate "New Democrat" but, from the viewpoint of many conservatives, he better fit the mold of a Faulkner rendition of Lloyd George, as described by the randy British Prime Minister's biographer: "Full of pride, petulance and pedigree, hot as a leek and amorous as goat."

Democrats saw a young, energetic centrist who, with the help of an attractive, politically astute wife, could breathe new life into a party that very much needed it. Conservatives saw an amoral, corrupt, liar and a cheat, devoid of both shame and decency. From their eyes, the Clinton White House was the damnedest collection of small town shysters, sharpies, flibbertigibbets and fly-by-nighters, savings and loan robbers, international crooks and schemers, Russian and Chinese arms dealers and spies, international dope peddlers, harridans, harpies, perjurers, liars, crooked real estate magnets, and porn peddlers that the town had ever witnessed.

As the realization of a phrase right out of T.S. Eliot, they saw the Clinton's as hell bent on the task of systematically "destroying the ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans." I don't know whether "hate" is the word for how conservatives felt about the Clintons. But most surely they felt a strong sense of revulsion, fear, loathing, and a deep concern that the cultural rot that had been gnawing at the nation's innards for over forty years was about to spread to the vital organs.

To them, Bill and Hillary were something new and much more dangerous than anything they had confronted before. Nothing was sacred to them, not even the ban on perjury, which forms the foundation for the nation's entire legal system. They were not selling liberal nostrums that had some negative side effects. They were selling the side effects themselves, uncut, like the merchants at the fair in the town of Vanity.

Bill eventually left town, leaving his wife behind as a notice that there would be no surrender or truce in the battle to change the soul of America. Another of his legacies was the election of a born-again Christian, George W. Bush.

To conservatives, Bush is a man who they hope will try to halt or at least slow the nation's march toward what they consider to be cultural suicide. To some liberals he is a socially dangerous religious fanatic who wants to impose on them a set of archaic, quasi-religious superstitions that directly threaten the America that they have worked so hard to create.

They believe that Bush is an evil man whose religiously-based views of morality and virtue are little more than tired bromides that have long-since lost their claim to truth, but which are constantly dragged out of a dusty closet by hypocrites like George Bush to be used as a tool to deny them their "rights" and constitutional freedom to do as they choose.

Is hate too strong a word to describe their view of him? Probably it is not. Certainly they fear and loathe him not just as a proponent of a philosophical concept they reject, but also as someone who is attempting to impose very specific limits on their behavior, something, for most of them, that even their parents could not do.

For example, while he has publicly acknowledged that, as a practical matter, he will not be able to stop abortions altogether, he has said that he will do all he can to halt the practice of crushing the skull of a full term baby just prior to its head being removed from the womb. To conservatives this sounds like an abominable procedure. To some liberals, it is a potent symbol of their "rights" and their freedom from the traditional bounds of conscience.

By the same token, President Bush has been fully supportive of the rights of gay men and women to be free from discrimination, either in the work place or in the community, and has expressed no opposition to civil arrangements whereby gay couples enjoy the civil benefits available to married men and women. But he has pledged to do what he can to stop same sex couples from joining in holy matrimony, and this has sparked an outcry of pure rage and charges that he is deeply bigoted and indifferent to the "rights" of yet another group of citizens.

Conservatives see this as a modest measure designed to protect the traditional family, which they see as the cornerstone of American society. Liberals see it as another heinous attempt by a religious fanatic to impose on them someone else's worn out concept of what is moral.

And that, I think, explains the frequent use of the word "hatred" during the past 12 years in reference to Presidents Clinton and Bush. It is a strong word. But then again, strong words are common when the stakes are very high and feelings about the issues involved are heartfelt.

**PANIC AND POLITICS.** It is almost inevitable that Republicans, particularly Beltway Republicans, will at some time in this campaign reach the point of full-fledged panic. Many of them remember what happened in 1992 to George H. W. Bush and fear that the son could repeat the mistakes of the father, leaving the party dispirited and out of the White House. Add to that the fact that the current President Bush has had a rough couple of months and that he is therefore tied with or even trailing presumptive Democratic nominee John Kerry in most polls, and many GOP leaders and party stalwarts are beginning to get jittery. Fortunately, though, true panic has yet to manifest. A few notables have lost faith, but most have not.

This apprehension among Republican has been widely reported in the press of late. What has received considerably less attention is the fact that the cognoscenti of the political left are also finding reasons to become concerned, not panicked yet, but concerned.

The first indication of it came last Tuesday, when primary voters in Wisconsin voted for John Edwards in fairly large numbers. While it is doubtful that the media-created story of Edwards's resurgence will prove to have legs, the fact that so many Democratic voters are having doubts about Kerry so late in the process is raising eyebrows. It's not as if this thing is really still competitive; Kerry has won 12 of 14 contests and has nearly four times the number of delegates Edwards has. Nevertheless, Democrats in primary states continue to vote "against" the Massachusetts liberal, who has won an absolute majority of votes in only five states, even though DNC Chairman Terry McAuliffe is telling them that he is the man that can beat Bush in November, and is therefore the candidate of choice.

A second reason for apprehension among Democrats came over the weekend from the likely nominee himself in the form of an open letter to President Bush about Vietnam. In a development that can only be called bizarre, the candidate whose entire campaign has been based on his biography as a Vietnam war hero, and who recently indicated that he supported his Party's chairman when he questioned whether the President had been AWOL during his Vietnam-era National Guard service, accused Bush and his allies of "going negative" by bringing up the subject of Vietnam. Specifically, the obviously delusional Kerry wrote to the President:

As you well know, Vietnam was a very difficult and painful period in our nation's history, and the struggle for our veterans continues. So, it has been hard to believe that you would choose to reopen these wounds for your personal political gain. But, that is what you have chosen to do.

It appears that Senator Kerry didn't realize that turnabout was fair play and that if he joined in criticizing the young twenty-something George W. Bush's behavior that his behavior at the same period of time would be similarly questioned. This seemed obvious to most observers some time ago, including yours truly, who wrote the following in this newsletter a couple of weeks back:

Kerry has been unable to control himself of late and has run off at the mouth, quite possibly threatening the favorability of the comparison [to Bush on Vietnam]. Both Kerry and Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe have joined in the Michael Moore-driven resuscitation of the thoroughly debunked tale of Bush's desertion of his National Guard duties when he moved to Alabama to help with a Senate campaign in 1972.

Now, after you stop laughing at the very idea of FOB extraordinaire Terry McAuliffe knocking anyone for dodging the draft, note that by hitting low and going negative, Kerry has opened himself up to return fire from both longtime foes and Bush supporters who will not hesitate to make an issue of the negative side of Kerry's relationship to the Vietnam war.

Of course, by that point in time, it was likely that the damage had already been done, and that Kerry's post-Vietnam record was already considered fair game. And now that the Senator realizes that 30-plus years was not near enough time for a great many veterans to forget what he said about them, or for a number of onetime POWs to forget how his speeches and Congressional testimony were used by their Vietnamese captors to attempt to break their spirits, he seems to want to take the issue off the table.

This is, in part, standard operating procedure for Democratic candidates: go negative first, and when your opponent responds, shriek that he's gone negative. But it is also an indication that Kerry is not entirely sure that he still likes the idea of turning this race into a contest over who did what regarding Vietnam. If this proves to be the case, then the question arises as to what, besides his Vietnam service, John Kerry actually brings to the table. Tax hikes?

A third indication that Democrats are concerned about the course their party's leaders are charting was the reaction of Democrats and Democratic leaning journalists to Ralph Nader's announcement this weekend that he will again seek the presidential votes of a few hundred of his closest friends and family. Democrats nearly universally agree that Nader was George W. Bush's accomplice in "stealing" the election in 2000, but are desperate to convey the opinion that he will not similarly affect the race this time around. I'm not so sure.

While it is almost certainly true that Nader will not likely win many votes in November, he doesn't need to do so in order to be a spoiler. In 2000, the then-Green Party candidate won less than three percent of the total popular vote nationwide, but very probably cost Al Gore the electoral votes of New Hampshire and Florida and thereby the election.

In 1996, Ross Perot managed almost nine percent of the popular vote, just less than half of what he won four years prior. It is hard to imagine Nader doing only half as well this time around, given that he did so poorly last time. But depending on the distribution of voters, even as little as one percent or one-and-a-half percent could make a big difference, if indeed the nation is split 50-50, as many pundits suggest. And since this hypothetical one percent will almost certainly come in the form of erstwhile Kerry voters, the Democrats' happy face insistence that they can overcome the Nader factor sounds more like wishful thinking than sound electoral analysis.

Finally, there is one last indication that the themes of this election may not play to the Democrats' advantage, and that they know it. On Thursday, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle told potential voters in South Dakota that he is pleased with and proud of the effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power and certainly does not buy the line that President Bush lied to Congress, the American people, and the world in order to justify an otherwise unjustifiable war. According to the *Rapid City Journal*:

Sen. Tom Daschle, D-S.D., on Thursday praised the Bush administration's war and nation-building work in Iraq and said he has no serious concerns about the lack of weapons of mass destruction.

Daschle told state chamber of commerce representatives meeting in the South Dakota capital that he is satisfied with the way things are going in Iraq.

"I give the effort overall real credit," Daschle said. "It is a good thing Saddam Hussein is no longer in power. It is a good thing we are democratizing the country."

He said he is not upset about the debate over pre-war intelligence on weapons of mass destruction, an issue that has dogged President Bush as Democratic presidential contenders have slogged through the primary season.

Though there may be some other explanation for Daschle's sudden about-face on Iraq and his breaking with the rest of his party on the issue, the most likely one is that he knows that his party's position is a loser, at least with South Dakotans, and that he cannot afford to be associated too closely with such a position when he is fighting for his political life.

Several weeks ago, in my 2004 preview piece, I made a long-shot prediction that Daschle's would be one of a handful of Democratic seats taken over by Republicans this November. Apparently the Minority Leader agrees that such an outcome is possible if he is not careful. And if Daschle fears that his home state's hearty Midwesterners are likely to turn him, one of their own, out of office for his peripheral association with his Party's stance on Iraq, then he can not be too terribly confident about the likelihood of their being willing to support an outsider, a New England liberal nonetheless, who has made opposition to the war a centerpiece of his campaign.

And if John Kerry is forced to write off the Midwest in addition to the South (which he should have written off the day it became clear that he'd be the nominee), then there is precious little room for error elsewhere in the country.

So while Kerry, Terry McAuliffe, and their respective spokespersons and publicists may talk a tough game, it is understandable if their proclaimed confidence is not shared universally throughout the Party. Republicans may well reach panic mode sometime later this spring or this summer, but current indications are that, if they do, they will simply join the Democrats there.

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