

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

Monday, April 12, 2004

THEY SAID IT

“Explosive violence in Iraq and persistent questions about the administration’s handling of terrorist threats before Sept. 11, 2001, have plunged President Bush into one of the most difficult moments of his presidency . . . Bush’s advisers expect political damage to the president, at least in the short term, given what has happened in Iraq in the past 10 days. ‘I think the American people know the president is resolved in this matter to complete our work,’ White House communications director Dan Bartlett said yesterday. ‘We have nothing to suggest that they don’t support him on the war on terror . . . I think you can expect polls to drop during this very difficult period.’”

From article entitled “Bush’s Low Profile Questioned as Violence Flares in Iraq,”
The Washington Post, Saturday, April 10, 2004.

STAYING THE COURSE IN IRAQ. Last week when American soldiers began to die in Iraq in unusually high numbers, President Bush appeared on television to make the point that he intended to “stay the course.” My reaction was that the decision to “stay the course” wasn’t up to him alone. He can quit the course on his own, but to “stay the course” he must have the American public’s support, not just when things are going well but also when they are going poorly. And therein, in my opinion, lies his most important challenge.

Now I generally don’t like analogies between what is happening in Iraq and America’s experience in Vietnam. But on this particular point, Vietnam is instructive. Early in that war, the public was, for the most part, favorably disposed to the action. But as American deaths mounted, as the price of the war began negatively to affect the U.S. economy, and as the optimistic forecasts by Washington policy makers routinely were overcome by events, critics of the war began publicly to question why America was there in the first place. And when President Nixon failed to provide an answer that was more convincing than the argument that there was no good reason to remain even for another day, public support began to wane. And Nixon, who inherited the war from President Johnson, was forced to throw in the towel.

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

With this in mind, I think that the most important factor in assessing the immediate future in Iraq is Bush's handling of the American public. As was the case in Vietnam, the U.S. military will do its job, and do it well. And given enough time, it will win the war, as well as the peace that follows. The question is whether President Bush will be able to win them the time to do it. I believe he will, but I must say, I am not absolutely sure.

To repeat what I said just over five months ago in the November 3 issue of this newsletter, in an article entitled "How Bush Could Lose The War In Iraq," in my opinion he absolutely must focus his efforts on convincing the public that the war is in the best interests of Americans, not just in the best interests of the Iraqis. I put it this way.

So the task ahead for the Bush administration, as I see it, involves convincing the American people once again that the battle over Iraq is directly — very directly — linked to American security. The argument that the enemy over there killed 20 American soldiers but that that is okay because the Iraqi people now have more electricity than they had when Saddam was running the place simply won't sell. In fact, it's an insult. I believe it is safe to say that the vast majority of Americans don't give a damn whether the Iraqi people have electricity, or even candles for that matter, if the cost of providing them with this luxury is the life of a single American soldier.

To put this another way, I think the Bush administration will lose the war for the hearts and minds of the public unless it stops measuring "success" in Iraq by how many amenities we have been able to provide the Iraqis. There most assuredly is a long-term link between this accomplishment and American security. But it is not one that is easily explained to the American people while they are mourning the daily loss of lives among their sons and daughters.

My advice to the Bush White House if I were asked, which I won't be, would be to heat this conflict up. Stop talking about how good the "average" Iraqi has it now that American troops are there, because no one cares. Reestablish the direct link between the American military presence in Iraq and the goal of destroying a dangerous enemy. If the link is real, then Americans will understand and support the effort. If it is illusory, or casual at best, then it is probably time to leave anyway.

Since I wrote that, the Bush White House has been somewhat less inclined to emphasize what a wonderful thing Americans are doing for Iraqis, which is a good thing. (Great minds think alike.) But, like a five year old who reverts to thumb sucking when tired, this White House still can't resist, when the going gets a little tough, defining success as making ordinary Iraqis happy. For example, last week White House spokesman Dan Bartlett said the following. "Despite the violence of the last 10 days, the Iraqi people are better off and their future is brighter than their past." My response is that someone should give this guy thirty-five cents and tell him to call someone who cares.

Even the President himself still often responds to critics of the invasion with the rhetorical question, "Are not the Iraqis better off today than they were under Saddam," which, if he keeps it up, I have little doubt will someday be answered by John Kerry with declaration that "I am more worried about whether the *American* people are better off."

And with all due respect, I would have to say that Bush is not doing a particularly good job of selling the idea that the American people are better off, or more importantly, that their children and grandchildren will be better off because Saddam no longer runs Iraq. If he were making this case as well as he should, the recent increased military casualties wouldn't have caused the kind of stir that they did. I put it this way in the above-quoted piece.

Time and again Americans have demonstrated great reluctance to put their military forces in harm's way for any cause other than national security, and narrowly defined national security, at that . . . This trait is so well known around the world that the enemies of the United States have identified it as a major weakness, not realizing that it does not demonstrate an unwillingness to sustain substantial loss of lives in military confrontations, but simply an unwillingness to do so in conflicts that are not directly threatening to America's most important security interests, as identified and agreed upon by a majority of citizens.

The problem in Iraq began, of course, when U.S. forces failed to find weapons of mass destruction. Had these weapons been found, even in small amounts, there would be no question today that the war was justified. Failing to find such weapons, President Bush had to quickly come up with an alternative primary justification for the invasion and, most especially, for continuing the extensive and expensive follow-up effort.

He settled on the cheery notion that by freeing the Iraq people from a brutal dictator America had paved the way for them to enjoy the fruits of a true democracy. This, he said, would bring them domestic tranquility and prosperity, and in doing so, it would provide an example for the rest of the Middle East, and this, in turn, would, over the long term, permanently solve the problem of Islamic terrorism by removing the root cause.

And this worked, at first. And why not? America had won the war, and won big. Some said the march to Baghdad ranked among the greatest military accomplishments in all of history. No one was gassed or subject to deadly biological or nuclear attacks. Casualties were relatively few. Saddam's statue was toppled to the apparent great pleasure of the Iraqis who witnessed it. The French and Germans were humiliated. And even the Democrats had to applaud.

Better yet, even though no WMDs were found, abundant evidence was uncovered that Saddam and his henchmen had been vicious, mass murderers. So why not take credit for having done something very good for the Iraqi people and for the world? Take a bow. Accept the thanks of peace loving people everywhere. Magnanimously agree to rebuild the country. Make it better than it was. Democratize it even. First Iraq, then the rest of the Middle East, and then the world.

And then a funny thing happened. It became apparent that if this was the new goal of the Iraqi effort, then the war was a long way from being over, and many more casualties were inevitable. Seemingly unbeknownst to President Bush, this raised a question in the minds of some Americans as to whether this new goal was worth the cost of achieving it. Some wondered if perhaps the American people should not have had some say in whether they wanted to sacrifice the lives of their fighting men and women in a scheme that is based on the novel, quite possibly even hokey theory that the war on terror can be won by a vast, expensive nation building plan for

Iraq. Shouldn't the President have attempted to sell this novel idea to the American people first, rather than have it leap forth, full grown, like Athena from Zeus' head, in full armor and uttering a war cry?

Maybe he can pull it off. As Steve points out in one of the next pieces, John Kerry hasn't been all that effective in criticizing Bush. Maybe his plan will show positive results quickly enough so the opposition doesn't have time to jell. But once again, my advice to the Bush White House if I were asked, which I won't be, would be to stop talking about how good the "average" Iraqi has it now that American troops are there, because no one cares. Reestablish the direct link between the American military presence in Iraq and the goal of destroying a dangerous enemy.

Tell the American public that a permanent American military presence in Iraq will make them safer over the long run because such a presence can be used as a base from which America can gather important, life saving intelligence throughout the Middle East; from which America can launch covert operations to destabilize the governments of terror sponsoring neighboring nations, such as Syria and Iran; from which America can be prepared to launch full scale military operations to protect oil supplies in Iraq and adjoining countries should the need arise; from which American troops can conduct active and on-going military operations against terrorist organizations from all over the region, draining their reserves and eventually challenging their resolve; and yes, from which America can demonstrate, over time, that freedom and democracy can benefit the people of nation such as Iraq.

THE PATH TO VICTORY GOES THROUGH IRAN. Watching events in Iraq unfold over the last couple weeks, I couldn't help but be reminded of one of the great moments in the film version of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, in which the plot takes a significant twist that alters dramatically the course of the war between the Corleones and the Five Families.

The scene, which takes place roughly halfway through the movie, has the title character, Don Vito Corleone and his *consigliere* and adopted son Tom Hagen riding in the backseat of a car, being driven home from a meeting at which the feuding families purportedly resolved their differences over the drug trade, made peace, and agreed that Michael Corleone should be allowed to return safely from exile in Sicily. The Godfather turns to Tom and off-handedly asks him to be certain that Don Barzini upholds the terms of the agreements just reached.

Tom, thinking his Don is growing absentminded says, "you mean Tattaglia," since Tom and everyone else (including the audience) believe at this point that Tattaglia is the one responsible for all of the Corleone's recent troubles – for starting the war by backing the drug pusher Sollazzo, for the attempt on the Godfather's life, and for the brutal execution of Vito's eldest son, Santino "Sonny" Corleone. The Godfather responds, "Tattaglia is a pimp. He never could have outfought Santino. But I didn't know 'til this day that it was Barzini all along."

The reason this scene comes to mind is that a similarly significant plot twist has occurred in Iraq during the past month, as it finally became obvious that deposing Saddam was the easy part and that the remnants of his much-vaunted Republican Guard are hardly the principal enemy with which the United States needs to concern itself at this point. Saddam, it turns out, was small potatoes in the battle to stabilize and remake Iraq, the equivalent of Puzo's Tattaglia.

And whether President Bush knows this yet or not, the events of the last couple weeks – the rallying of armed insurgents by Shi’ite thug Moqtada al-Sadr, the attacks on American soldiers, the taking of hostages, and the attempt to broaden the resistance to the entire Shi’ite population – make it certain that the day is coming when the President will have to turn to his *consigliere*, Dick Cheney, and say, “Saddam was a pimp. He could never have pulled this off. But I didn’t know ‘til this day that it was [Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei all along.”

You see, Sadr is unarguably funded and supported by the Iranians, who oppose not just the Americans, but Iraqi Shi’ite leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has long argued that the combination of religion with politics, as exists in the Islamic Republic, serves merely to corrupt the religion. Sadr visited Tehran last summer and undoubtedly marshals his rebellion with Iran’s blessing. According to several sources, most notably to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s “Iran Report,” when Sadr was in Tehran last summer, he and the Mad Mullahs agreed to throw in together against the Americans in Iraq. To wit:

According to . . . reports, Al-Sadr has a close relationship with Tehran and is being maneuvered to supplant SCIRI’s [Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq] Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim . . .

Al-Sadr and his hosts reportedly made a deal that in exchange for financial aid to him and his followers, he would accept the Iranian theocratic model of Vilayat-i Faqih (Guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult) and advocate it in Iraq, reject the Anglo-American presence in Iraq, and oppose the main source of emulation in Al-Najaf, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Moreover, Sadr and his followers would replace the traditional Shi’a groups, particularly SCIRI.

Sadr has also openly allied himself with and receives support (moral and perhaps otherwise) from both Hezbollah and Hamas, each of which, in turn, is also sustained, to a greater or lesser extent, by Iran. And since the uprising began last week, the fact that Iranian fingerprints are all over the resistance in Iraq has simply become unavoidable.

The surprising thing is that it is not clear that the Bush administration understands this yet. After all, it’s not like the Mullahs have tried to hide their intense desire to shape the future of post-Saddam Iraq. And it has been over a year since Iranian mullah Kadhém al-Husseini al-Haeri delivered a fatwa to the Shi’ite leaders of Iraq, obliging them “to seize the first possible opportunity to fill the power vacuum in the administration of Iraqi cities.”

Analysts and other experts who should have the President’s ear, most especially Michael Ledeen, have been saying since before the campaign began that the threat that Saddam’s removal would pose to the other hostile regimes in the region (the “Terror Masters,” as Ledeen calls them) would be so great that they would have to involve themselves heavily in the cause to defeat the Americans, longstanding hostility to Saddam notwithstanding.

Indeed, Mark and I were so convinced of the obviousness of the Iranian stake in the American operation in Iraq that we predicted more than once that the Bush team would, immediately upon establishing a beachhead in Iraq, mount a semi-covert campaign against the Mullahs next door.

The fact that they have not, or at least have not done so successfully, is, in my opinion, the greatest miscalculation in the war on terror to date.

To make progress then, President Bush must address the role of outside forces in Iraq. Specifically, he will have to deal with Iran. This is all the more imperative after this past weekend, when some million Shi'ite pilgrims, accompanied no doubt by several hundred, if not several thousand Iranian provocateurs, entered Iraq for the holy day of Arbain.

While the most efficient means of dealing with the Iranians would be to engage them directly, both in Iraq and in Iran, such an aggressive strategy is unlikely. Fortunately, the domestic political situation in Iran provides an alternative opportunity, namely that President Bush could disregard the advice of the pro-Mullah contingent at the State Department and show increasing moral and perhaps material support for democratic Iranian insurgents. Fighting for their lives at home, the Mullahs and their fedayeen thugs are less likely to be able effectively to fight Americans in neighboring Iraq. And if the insurgents were to prove successful in overthrowing the Islamic Republic, then the battle for Iraq would become significantly easier, and President Bush would have produced the greatest victory yet in the war on terror.

One would think at least that public support for such an action would not be too terribly hard to gain. It has been twenty-five years since Iranian revolutionaries took the American embassy and twenty-one since Iranian-funded murderers attacked the American barracks in Beirut, killing 241 Marines. Those actions have never been answered, though many Americans remember them vividly and bitterly.

The public face of terror has certainly changed significantly over the last decade or so, but in light of recent events in Iraq, it looks more and more like it's been Khamenei all along . . . except when it was Khomeini before him.

UNSOLICITED ADVICE TO DEMOCRATS: SHUT UP. By all measures, last week should have been a damaging one for President Bush. On top of the escalation of hostilities in Iraq, the media made quite a show out of National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's public appearance before the 9/11 Commission. The President has staked his claim to re-election heavily upon his wartime leadership, and between these two scenes, that leadership, both before and after 9/11, was seriously called into question. Theoretically, this should have hurt his chances for re-election.

Yet, while it is undeniable that President Bush has had better weeks, the delight shown by certain factions of the Democratic Party at Bush's recent troubles, as well as the media posturing of certain power-hungry factions within the GOP (read: Nebraska Senator and likely '08 Presidential wannabe Chuck Hagel), would appear to be premature at best. Indeed, in the grand scheme of things, neither of the sources of bad news last week is likely to be enough to derail George W. Bush's reelection. And even if both continue to break badly for the President over the next several months, this will not necessarily spell his demise.

Certainly, the 9/11 Commission hearings and media coverage have not helped. But it is important to remember in this context that those who want the President out, are going to believe the worst about him, regardless of what the commission says. And those who want him re-

elected are going to believe the best about him, or are at least going to give him the benefit of the doubt. Indeed, a handful of polls taken in the wake of terrorism advisor Richard Clarke's allegedly "damning" testimony two weeks ago tend to confirm that respondents' opinion of Clarke and the value of his testimony depended quite heavily on their voting intentions. In other words, Bush voters think Clarke is a disgruntled jerk, while Kerry voters think he's brave, honest, and insightful. The Commission's bloviating changes minds very little.

In the battle for the undecided votes, though, I think the public nature of the hearings during the past couple of weeks may well have hurt the Commission more than it hurt President Bush. If the Commission had kept to itself and, after a quiet investigation, had published findings that 9/11 could have been prevented, the President might have been in trouble. As it is, the behavior of a few of the Democratic commissioners, Richard Ben-Veniste and former Senator Bob Kerrey in particular, has made it difficult for anyone who watched the hearings not to conclude that this commission is very biased, and that some individuals are using it as a forum to engage in rank partisan attacks on the Bush administration.

Kerrey's performance in particular stands out as offensive. Whether he was, as many suspect, auditioning to be John Kerry's running mate, or simply trying, once again, to exaggerate his importance to the national discourse, Kerrey appeared pointedly partisan, overtly antagonistic, and more than a touch condescending in his cross examination of Dr. Rice. Not only did he not do himself, the commission, or his party any favors, he likely did them all damage.

And this, naturally, brings me to the reason why I believe that this may have little impact on the election. For no matter how dark things get for Bush, he still has one trump card, that being that his opponents are a pretty sorry lot. All the Democrats have to do is let events in Iraq and in the investigation into 9/11 take their course and be there to pick up the pieces if things go poorly. But they can't help themselves. Whether out of desperation, stupidity, or a grand conceit, which makes them believe that "the people" want to know what they are thinking all the time, the Democrats can't seem to be quiet. And more often than not, what comes rolling out when they open up, makes George W. Bush seem all the more responsible and adult by comparison.

As if the aggressively hostile Kerrey were not bad enough, the party's elder "statesmen" have all felt it necessary to try their best to undermine the President and the war effort over the past couple of weeks, making themselves, and by extension their party, look petty and spiteful in the process. Ted Kennedy, of course, felt it necessary to compare the current President to Richard Nixon and to call Iraq "Bush's Vietnam," (conveniently forgetting, of course, that it was his own brother, not Nixon, who started our war in Southeast Asia). Robert Byrd, the Senate's longest serving member, decided it would be advantageous to broadcast to the world that he believes the best way to deal with the problems in Iraq is to turn tail and run.

And, perhaps most interestingly, former President Jimmy Carter called the situation in Iraq a disaster, apparently oblivious to the realization that the radical Shi'ites, who are bent on taking American hostages and punishing "The Great Satan," just might have decided that they could get away with such a thing without any repercussions after having studied their predecessors' experience with the little Nobel Peace Prize winner from Georgia.

On top of all of this, the candidate himself has come back from his ski vacation just as prone to shooting himself in the foot as before his respite. Rather than simply stating his support for U.S. troops, or something similarly innocuous, Kerry had to try to rub the President's face in the current mess and, in so doing, made himself look silly and "unpresidential," to say the least.

In the days after Moqtada al-Sadr had called for the murder of American soldiers and had, in fact, begun an attack on U.S. and coalition forces, Kerry felt it necessary to defend Sadr's right to freedom of speech. In what can only be described as a bizarre incident, Kerry told NPR that the Iranian proxy Sadr was a "legitimate voice" of the Iraqi people. According to Newsmax:

In an interview broadcast Wednesday morning, Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry defended terrorist Shiite imam Muqtada al-Sadr as a "legitimate voice" in Iraq, despite the fact that he's led an uprising that has killed nearly 20 American GIs in the last two days.

Speaking of al-Sadr's newspaper, which was shut down by coalition forces last week after it urged violence against U.S. troops, Kerry complained to National Public Radio, "They shut a newspaper that belongs to a legitimate voice in Iraq."

As if that were not bad enough, the gaffe-prone presidential wannabe tried to backtrack, but wound up only making things worse. Again, according to Newsmax:

In the next breath, however, the White House hopeful caught himself and quickly changed direction. "Well, let me . . . change the term 'legitimate.' It belongs to a voice — because he has clearly taken on a far more radical tone in recent days and aligned himself with both Hamas and Hezbollah, which is a sort of terrorist alignment."

Did you catch that? Hamas and Hezbollah are "sort of" terrorists in the estimation of the esteemed Senator from Nutsville. Every day it becomes more and more apparent that these guys are so desperate that they will say or do anything necessary to get on the opposite side of the issue as President Bush, no matter how absolutely stupid and insufferable it makes them look.

No matter what else happens, Bush still has that going for him.

KERRY'S CATHOLIC STRATEGY. I had intended to let this important story slide until next week, hoping to devote more attention and time to it then. Events over the weekend, however, have compelled me to mention it today, if only briefly, with the intention of returning to it later if need be.

John Kerry is, in my opinion, intentionally courting a public rebuke from his bishop, Archbishop Sean O'Malley, or some other high-ranking Church official, apparently believing that such a strategy is the most effective way to use his "defiant" Catholicism to his advantage. For weeks now, I have suggested that Kerry is on a collision course with the Church over his public embrace of policies that conflict with Church teachings, most notably abortion. I now believe that such a collision is precisely what he desires.

Yesterday, Kerry attended Easter mass at home in Boston and received communion, which, as *The Washington Post's* Charlotte Allen predicted, was “a controversial action, a line drawn in the sand of conflict between Kerry and his church over its teachings on the contentious issue of abortion.” This comes a week after Kerry, in front of reporters and photographers, received communion at the Protestant Charles Street AME Church in Boston, in violation of Church rules, and after Kerry gave a cleverly creative (and entirely wrong) statement on why Church teachings accommodated his dissension on abortion.

Given all of this, I suspect that Kerry has come to the conclusion that he cannot win this fight with the Church, and that he is better off trying to paint himself as the valiantly defiant victim of a new inquisition led by “radically conservative” forces within the Church. He will try to use this battle to strengthen his standing with the aggressively secular factions of the Democratic Party and to endear himself to other liberal Catholics who disagree with Church teachings on such issues as abortion, birth control, and gay marriage.

Over the next several weeks, therefore, I believe you can look for Kerry to continue to challenge his Church; for the Church to reach its breaking point and to sanction him; and for Kerry to wear that sanction as a badge of honor, claiming it shows him to be more American than Catholic and a voice of reason against the forces of reactionism within the Church.

This is, needless to say, an exceptionally risky strategy, and one that I doubt seriously will be successful. Under the circumstances, though, which place Kerry directly in conflict with Church doctrine, it may be the best the candidate can do.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

Copyright 2004. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved. Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.