

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

Tuesday, June 1, 2004

THEY SAID IT

"Marxism rests on the romantic notion of Rousseau that nature endows men with the qualities necessary to a free, equal, fraternal, family-like living together, and our sole problem is to fix up the external conditions. All Marx did about this with his dialectic philosophy was to change the tenses in the romance: Nature *will* endow men with these qualities *as soon as* the conditions are fixed up."

--Reflections on the Failure of Socialism, Max Eastman.

AL GORE, METAPHOR FOR HIS PARTY. In some ways, the reaction to Al Gore's rabid ranting last week about the Bush foreign policy to a MoveOn.org audience was entirely predictable. Republicans have been saying for some time now that the former Vice President has come unhinged, and for them Gore's performance merely confirmed what they already believed they knew. Though some were kinder than others to the hapless, two-time presidential candidate, *New York Post* columnist John Podhoretz's reaction was fairly typical of those on the political right. He wrote:

It is now clear that Al Gore is insane. I don't mean that his policy ideas are insane, though many of them are. I mean that based on his behavior, conduct, mien and tone over the past two days, there is every reason to believe that Albert Gore Jr., desperately needs help. I think he needs medication, and I think that if he is already on medication, his doctors need to adjust it or change it entirely.

What was a bit surprising was the reaction from those in his own party. Though Al is hardly the most popular Democrat in the world, he was the party's nominee just four years ago and would quite likely have been the nominee again this year had he chosen to run. Nevertheless, even those on the left appeared willing to concede that perhaps Al is in need of a nice long rest, as they tried their very best to get as far away from the "Carthage Crackpot" as possible.

Liberal bellwether Maureen Down declared that Gore "hollered so much, he made Howard Dean look like George Pataki," and suggested that John Kerry's advisors were "surprised and

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8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,
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annoyed” by the speech because they believe that Gore reminds voters of “the wackadoo wing of the Democratic Party.”

I can certainly understand why those on the left, who are determined to unseat George W. Bush at any cost, would want to distance themselves and the Democratic Party from the raving of the party’s washed-up loser from the last contest. But I can’t help thinking that the rush to get away from Gore is more than a little disingenuous.

Yes, Kerry probably stands a better chance of winning if his party’s nuts are kept squirreled away. And yes, the calm, almost morose Kerry is less threatening to moderate swing voters than the hollering, arm-flapping, flop-sweating Gore. But whether Democrats like it or not, Al Gore is, in many ways, the very personification of the anxieties, neuroses, moral norms, and ethical beliefs of their liberal ideology. Rather than dumping on and running from Gore, after watching the former VP’s manic performance last Wednesday, Democrats should have looked at themselves in the mirror and taken a line from Walt Kelly’s immortal Pogo: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

To begin with, Gore is quite obviously angry. For eight years, he was a hair’s breadth from being the most powerful man in the world. And while most people generally believe him to have been something of a lightweight Vice President, especially in comparison to the current occupant of that office, he was also as close to assuming the reigns of power from his boss as anyone since Gerald Ford. Impeachment, resignation, angry husbands and fathers – almost anything could have taken Bill out, leaving Al in charge. And before becoming the nation’s second-banana, Gore was, for eight years, a reasonably well-respected Senator, after having served four terms as a member of the House of Representatives. Today, he is unemployed. For so long, he was so powerful. And now he is nothing. No wonder he’s unhappy.

The Democratic Party has followed a similar trajectory. Just ten short years ago, you may recall, the Democrats held unified government under one of the most charismatic and clever politicians in recent memory. Except for six years during the 1980’s, when Ronald Reagan sat in the White House and the GOP controlled the Senate, Democrats had been in control of both houses of Congress for the better part of the last half of the century. They were, it seemed, the permanent majority party. Even when the upstart Newt Gingrich shocked the nation two years into the Clinton presidency and led his party into the Congressional majority, most Democrats denied the possibility of realignment and held fast to the belief that the Gingrich Revolution was temporary and that they would be returned to their rightful place in due time.

But it didn’t happen. The GOP remains the majority party in both houses and now has its own unified government. Moreover, Democratic prospects for regaining majority status in either house are quite poor. Republicans controlled the majority of the early-decade redistricting processes and were thus able to game the system, making their House majority more stable. On the Senate side, the Democrats are quite literally old and tired. Five Democratic Senators called it quits this time around, and party stalwarts like Byrd and Kennedy are graying fast and can be expected soon to join their colleagues in retirement. In other words, like Gore, the Democratic Party is out of power, is unlikely to return to power, and is consequently angry.

Of course, the anger that Al Gore feels at being an essentially powerless “private citizen,” is nothing compared to the earth-shaking fury he feels about the way in which the power he believed was rightfully his was “taken” from him. Though recount after recount all found that President Bush would have won Florida no matter how the chads were tabulated, Gore appears still to believe that he is the duly elected President of the United States, and that George W. Bush is a pretender who unlawfully usurped the office. Gore came close to fulfilling what he believed to be his destiny, so close, as OpinionJournal’s James Taranto put it, “that he was tempted to try to steal the election.” But once again, he failed. And he is, to put it mildly, immeasurably bitter about the whole thing.

Here again, the parallel to the Democratic Party as a whole is striking. If I had a dime for every time over the past three-and-a-half years that I have heard a Democrat say something stupid like Bush was “selected not elected” or that an “illegitimate President” has lead us into an “illegitimate war,” I would almost be able to pay off Mark’s bar tab at his regular hangout, the Mount Jackson Moose Lodge. Indeed, the whole “Anybody But Bush” movement that eventually propelled John Kerry to the Democratic nomination is itself an outgrowth of party operatives’ insistence that Bush, with the help of five compliant conservative Supreme Court Justices and his brother Jeb, “stole” the election in 2000, and that his “unlawful” Presidency must be ended by any means necessary. Again, as with Gore, the rage and bitterness at the perceived slight in 2000 is palpable among rank and file Democrats.

But while this stylistic congruence between Gore and the Democratic Party is interesting, it is in the substance of the speech he gave last week that the former Vice President proves to be the perfect metaphor for the modern Democratic Party.

As Mark and I have written many times over the past several years, the most important difference between liberals and conservatives is the moral systems by which they live their lives and judge their own behavior and that of others. And while Gore probably did not intend last week to give a concise overview of the moral distinctions between liberals and conservatives, that is what he did.

You see, the modern political left’s morality is heavily influenced by Rousseau and Marx, who maintained that the problem is not mankind’s personal predilection for bad behavior, as explained by the concept of original sin, but is instead the direct result of faulty social and economic systems. Thus, with a healthy dose of well-intentioned social engineering, a good politician can cure the society and, in so doing, cure the sinner. This theory, of course, varies notably from the traditionalist Judeo-Christian morality, which predominates on the right.

What this means in practice is that the left’s morality is largely divorced from the Christian concept as set forth in the Decalogue, and focuses instead on the extent to which one “cares” about large groups of abstract entities, such as “the poor” and the “oppressed,” as well as the degree to which one is involved in using government to do something about the world’s ills. In this moral system, how one conducts his or her personal life is notably less consequential than for whom one “fights,” as Bill Clinton once put it. For example, those who use government to fight for the “oppressed” are presumed to be righteous, despite their personal failings, and those who do not are presumed to be wicked, despite their personal strengths.

So when, for example, Gore declares that President Bush “has brought us humiliation in the eyes of the world” and “has brought deep dishonor to our country and built a durable reputation as the most dishonest President since Richard Nixon,” conservatives are left believing, as columnist Charles Krauthammer put it, “that Gore has gone off his lithium again.”

How, they wonder, could the man who served for eight years as aider-and-abettor-in-chief to Bill Clinton possibly accuse anyone, much less President Bush, of doing anything to humiliate the nation or of being dishonest? After all, it was Al’s boss who kept the head of the Palestinian Authority waiting in the Oval Office lobby while he had his 24-year-old intern service him. It was Al’s boss whose lurid sexual predilections, the likes of which would almost certainly make even Lynndie England blush, were spelled out in grand jury testimony and then published for the world to see. It was Al’s boss who committed perjury and whose entire defense rested on the definition of a tiny copulative (no pun intended) verb.

And it was Al himself who broke all the campaign finance rules, including taking checks from impoverished Buddhist nuns; who lied about never having been told those rules; and who, when caught in his web of lies, declared that he must have missed all the White House counsel’s warnings because he had consumed a great deal of iced tea that day and had to visit the loo on numerous occasions. Yet this guy has the temerity to call Bush dishonorable and dishonest and to call for the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice?

One would think that someone close to Gore would say to him, “Um, look, Al, do you think it’s a good idea, given your penchant for ‘exaggeration,’ that you accuse the President of the United States of being a liar?” But no one did, and no one will, in large part because liberals don’t believe Al’s lies or Bill’s lies or Bill’s adulterous behavior are important, except in the sense that they are strategically questionable. It doesn’t matter what they do in their personal lives because they stand up for “women’s right,” and for “the poor,” and for “the children.”

Liberal icon and alleged comedian Al Franken didn’t write a book entitled *Lies and Lying Liars Who Tell Them* about Clinton and Gore because in his view the end justifies their lies. But George W. Bush, who subscribes to the Christian belief that morality is best defined by personal behavior, is a “liar” whose lies matter. And in this sense, Al’s lashing out at the President last week was perfectly in line with Democratic sensibilities and was, indeed, a spot-on depiction of the Marxist component of the modern left’s moral system.

But the speech was more than that as well. You see, it isn’t only the ideas of Rousseau and Marx that have helped shape modern liberal thought. Fortunately for us, Gore managed to remind us of two other figures in the left’s panoply of intellectual luminaries last week, when he said the following. “We also know and not just from De Sade and Freud – the psychological proximity between sexual depravity and other people’s pain.” And while we will return to De Sade’s influence on the left another day, it is Freud that concerns us here.

In his classic *Modern Times*, the inimitable Paul Johnson argues that Freud’s influence on modern liberal thought is unquestionable, his works, in combination with Marx’s, providing indispensable relief from the ancient Judeo-Christian concept of individual responsibility. Johnson put it thusly:

In the Freudian analysis, the personal conscience, which stood at the very heart of the Judeo Christian ethic, and was the principal engine of individualistic achievement, was dismissed as a mere safety-device, collectively created, to protect civilized order from the fearful aggressiveness of human beings . . . Freud said he intended to show that guilt-feelings, unjustified by any human frailty, were “the most important problem in the development of civilization.” It might be, as sociologists were already suggesting, that society could be collectively guilty in creating conditions which made crime and vice inevitable. But personal guilt feelings were an illusion to be dispelled. None of us was individually guilty; we were all guilty . . .

Marxist and Freudian analysis combined to undermine, in their different ways, the highly developed sense of personal responsibility, and of duty towards a settled and objectively true moral code, which was at the centre of nineteenth century European civilization.

This belief that responsibility lies not with the individual but with the society as a whole or with those who created conditions in which otherwise guilt-inducing actions might occur is evident throughout Gore’s speech. We cannot blame the perverts and malcontents who arranged, photographed, and filmed the prison-house “atrocities” with which we are all now familiar, Gore lectured. We must, instead, blame those responsible for creating the climate in which perverts and malcontents could feel free to be themselves. Specifically, he said:

Private Lynndie England did not make the decision that the United States would not observe the Geneva Convention. Specialist Charles Graner was not the one who approved a policy of establishing an American Gulag of dark rooms with naked prisoners to be “stressed” and even - we must use the word - tortured - to force them to say things that legal procedures might not induce them to say. These policies were designed and insisted upon by the Bush White House....

How dare they blame their misdeeds on enlisted personnel from a Reserve unit in upstate New York. President Bush owes more than one apology. On the list of those he let down are the young soldiers who are themselves apparently culpable, but who were clearly put into a moral cesspool. The perpetrators as well as the victims were both placed in their relationship to one another by the policies of George W. Bush.

Again, the average conservative would think that this is just plain cuckoo. But the liberal moral system accepts that individuals are little more than victims of their circumstances and are thus not culpable for their actions. The blame lies with those who created the conditions, in Gore’s mind, George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Stephen Cambone, and Condoleezza Rice.

Now, the left may object to the idea that its moral system is somehow contrary to Judeo-Christian beliefs, but American voters appear to have picked up on the dissimilarity. Though self-identified “Christians” tend to align with both Republicans and Democrats, election data demonstrate quite clearly that those who actually *practice* Christianity, those who attend church services regularly, identify overwhelmingly with the GOP. As columnist David Klinghoffer noted in a piece last week:

In 2000, Voter News Service reported that the 14% of voters who attended religious services more than once a week voted for George W. Bush over Al Gore by 63% to 36%. Meanwhile, the 14% who never went to services supported Gore over Bush by an equally commanding margin, 61% to 32%.

I have no doubt that Al Gore considers himself a Christian. Indeed, he has said so many times. But the evidence contained in his foreign policy speech last week suggests that his moral code is something other than that traditionally associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. The same can, of course, be said for his party.

Gore is angry, bitter, and judges right and wrong by different standards than does George W. Bush. The Democratic Party, as a collective, is angry, bitter, and judges right and wrong by different standards than the GOP. Try as they may to run from Gore, Democrats can never run fast enough to get away. Whether they like it or not, Al Gore is them, and they are him.

GEORGE BUSH, DOWN BUT NOT OUT. It was eminently predictable that at this stage in the election cycle a great many pundits would come to the conclusion that the incumbent President is in deep trouble, so much so that he is likely to lose the election. After all, what fun is an election without a bit of drama?

The “evidence” in support of this newly popular view is not the absolute level of the President’s approval ratings, which remains in what might be called the non-crisis range, but the downward slope in the approval trend-line, which, as with any trend-line that is not perfectly flat, will eventually reach zero or infinity if not altered by some external event.

And therein lies the rub, as the saying goes. You see, there are a great many external events coming up, some of which are likely to have a significant impact on both the slope and the direction of the above-cited trend-line. And whether those who are forecasting a Bush loss know it or not, not all of these events are necessarily going to favor John Kerry.

The most important of these is the June 30 turnover of governing authority in Iraq to an interim Iraqi government. The assumption of Kerry hopefuls appears to be that the recent stepped-up fighting in Iraq, the resultant increase in U.S. casualties, and the consequent drop in public support for the war represent a downward sloping trend-line that is likely to steepen when the turnover collapses into chaos.

They may, of course, be correct. But what if the turnover goes smoothly? What if President Bush and the American military leadership are correct when they say that the current trouble in Iraq is being caused by a relatively small number of well armed and highly motivated individuals who are making a last desperate attempt to prevent the transfer of power because they know that when that occurs Iraq will be lost to their cause, and the stage will be set for a weakening of their influence throughout the Middle East.

Largely because of the President’s poor communication skills, most Americans are not fully aware of the very high stakes involved in Bush’s effort to create an American protectorate smack dab in the center of the Middle East. But it seems likely that anti-American militants in places

such as Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, and the West Bank have no doubts about the dire implications for their long-term plans should a pro-American Iraqi government be established and succeed.

When considering the possible success of the handover on June 30, I think it is important not to assume that the failure of the Bush administration to create a peaceful, Western style democracy in Iraq will necessarily represent a failure of the immediate Iraqi war effort, either in reality or in the eyes of the American public. As I have said many times in these pages, my guess is that most Americans do not care one bit whether Iraq is a happy democracy or a nasty plutocracy, as long as there are very few if any Americans dying in combat there, and that the government which eventually replaces Saddam's is reasonably friendly toward the United States and no more murderous than the norm among other nations in the Middle East.

It is also worth considering the nature of what Bush is offering to those Iraqis who on June 30 will be handed the reins of power. To wit. You guys can have your country back and, if you can get along with each other, life can be pretty great. As leaders of an oil rich country that has America's full support, you can become big players on the international stage and at the same time become fabulously wealthy individuals. You and your family members will be able to steal millions upon millions of dollars through corrupt oil deals and an endless array of schemes to skim more millions off the top of American and U.N. reconstruction funds.

You can probably live in one of Saddam's palaces. There are plenty to go around. You can travel to New York, Washington, and all the major cities of the world and be feted by government and business leaders at each stop. You and your colleagues can eventually become big swinging honchos at OPEC. You can have your own private security force that travels with you everywhere you go. Together you can build a formidable national army and a police force, and in the meantime be protected by the greatest and most powerful military in the world, which will hunt down and kill the enemies of your regime at your behest.

All you have to do is control that portion of the Iraqi public that you represent in this coalition government, get along reasonably well with those members of the coalition who have the responsibility for other factions within the country, and be friendly toward the United States, which is making all of this possible. Eventually, if you like, the Iraqi military can join forces with the United States and kick Syria's butt and then Iran's, which will increase Iraq's influence in the region beyond even the dreams of Saddam Hussein.

Or, you can join forces with a rag tag bunch of murderous, religious zealots, make things so difficult that the Americans will leave, and then be killed by the zealots for having been in bed with the Americans while they were in Iraq.

Maybe this scenario spinning is far fetched. Maybe the turnover will go poorly. Maybe Americans will continue to die in large numbers and Kerry will be able to claim, like Nixon did in reference to Vietnam, that he has a "secret plan" to "get us out." But frankly, if I were a Democrat, I wouldn't bet the White House on this eventuality. And I would be careful not to let the public know that I am hoping for the United States to suffer a humiliating defeat in Iraq.

Another upcoming event that is likely to alter the slope and direction of Bush's approval rating curve is the Democratic Convention in late July. And again, it is not a foregone conclusion that this will play to Kerry's benefit.

You see the press and the pundits are portraying the convention as a grand opportunity for the public to get to know John Kerry. But in fact it will not be Kerry who will be on display during the highly televised extravaganza. It will be the modern day Democratic Party. Kerry will make an entrance on the final evening to accept his party's nomination and give a speech. But the four preceding days will feature the nation's leading Democratic politicians and representatives from the party's core support groups.

High on the agenda will be a series of speeches and interviews from the likes of such angry senior Democratic politicians as Teddy Kennedy, Nancy Pelosi, Howard Dean, and Al Gore. In a preview of coming attractions, Gore gave such a rabid speech last week that no less a harridan than Maureen Dowd described him as representing the "wackadoo wing of the Democratic Party." Like the "before" portion of a Lithium ad, these folks and others like them can be expected to fill the airwaves with hand wringing over the deteriorated state in which America finds itself today, mouth foaming over the "shameful" leadership of George Bush, and loud sales pitches for a worn out, left-wing political agenda that is as relevant to today's politics as the Smothers Brothers and Bob Dylan.

Interspersed between these speeches and interviews, viewers will be reminded of the party's long history of corruption by the appearance of its sleaze ridden boss Terry McAuliffe and a host of union thugs. These latter will be in Boston to promote a protectionist agenda that would put millions of Americans out of work. Then, of course, there will be a steady parade of intellectually vacuous Hollywood celebrities spouting political and economic inanities and promoting moral turpitude, along with a veritable menagerie of leaders of various special interest groups representing the most extreme positions on some of the nation's most complex and controversial social issues.

Dedicated party regulars will eat it up, of course. But there is, I believe, a strong possibility that the end result will be to remind the vast majority of middle-of-the-road voters why, during the past decade, they removed the Democrats from the leadership of both the House and the Senate and returned the White House to the GOP.

In what may turn out to be one of the most high profile pre-convention stories, the Party will have to decide who is to fill the ritual slot of keynote African-American speaker. Given that the Kerry campaign has no high profile blacks in its entourage, and that Jesse Jackson, the quadrennial favorite, has finally been "outed" as a sleazy and corrupt hypocrite, the even more sleazy and corrupt Al Sharpton will be demanding his right to claim the honor.

The whole thing will be great fun for the pundit community, but an exercise in sheer terror for the Kerry camp, which must have the enthusiastic support of black Democrats if it hopes to win in November, but must be careful not to offend middle of the road white voters, who are generally put off by the rhetoric and the character of the likes of Jackson, Sharpton and others of their ilk, who were once described by J.C. Watts as "race baiting poverty pimps." If I were asked, which I won't be, I would say that the best choice by far would be the young, intelligent,

articulate and moderate Congressman Harold Ford from Tennessee. But I suspect that in the end Sharpton will win the coveted slot, and decent people everywhere can retch.

Finally, the convention will feature prime-time speeches by both Bill and Hillary, who are by far the party's most astute politicians and best-loved characters. Together they are almost sure to give the two finest, most warmly received, and only memorable speeches at the convention, including John Kerry's. And they will receive spontaneous standing ovations that will rival the mandatory one that Kerry will receive on the final night. This will remind Democrats everywhere that they once had a president they really liked, that they have a potential one waiting in the wings whom they would probably like even more, and are about to nominate instead a candidate who is so gawky, arrogant, inarticulate, and indecisive that Al Gore had rejected him four years earlier for the job of vice president.

A third event, which has received little speculative attention, but which is certain to have a decisive impact on the outcome of the November election, is the series of televised presidential and vice presidential debates. These debates provide those few precious moments when the candidates meet eye to eye in the living rooms of millions of Americans and put not just their proposed policies and debating skills on display, but, much more importantly, their personalities. As such, these debates will, I believe, represent a make or break opportunity for John Kerry.

Now I would be the first to admit that I am not good at determining the winners and losers at these forums. I reached this humble conclusion after watching the debate between Dan Quayle and Lloyd Bentson sixteen years ago on a houseboat on the St. Croix River just outside Minneapolis, drinking beer and eating steaks with a group of friends who worked for what was then called IDS. At evening's end, we all merrily agreed that Quayle had more than held his own against the pompous old windbag from Texas. Yet, much to my surprise, I discovered early the next morning that all of us had been terribly wrong, that, according to the "experts" in the mainstream media, Dan Quayle's performance was on par with General Custer's at Little Big Horn. Who knew?

Yet, for what it is worth, I can't help but think that John Kerry will have trouble turning in the kind of decisive performance during these upcoming debates that he must have if he is to convince the public that it is time for a change in leadership.

Aside from the information disadvantage challengers customarily have against incumbents, Kerry's positions on many of the most important issues are, to borrow a phrase that has become popular among the pundits when discussing the Senator from Massachusetts, "highly nuanced." On other important issues, the phrase "flip flop" is often used by pundits to describe Kerry's frequently changing positions, past and present.

It is arguable that a little ambiguity is a good thing in a race where moderate voters are likely to determine the outcome, although one could be forgiven for wondering how it is playing with the rank and file member of a party that gets most of its political energy from a variety of highly vocal groups of rabid extremists. One thing is clear, however, and that is that nuanced and inconsistent positions are not generally regarded as the weapons of choice in knock-down, drag-out debates, especially against an opponent who tends to take very clear, even dogmatic positions on even the toughest issues.

Now it is a popular thing among Democrats when discussing the upcoming debates to note that President Bush leaves a great deal to be desired when it comes to communication skills; that he often tortures the English language; and tends to employ tired old clichés that often seem inappropriate and inadequate when addressing important issues. What they don't say, but what is true nevertheless, is that John Kerry is no Daniel Webster himself.

In fact, one of the *Washington Post's* senior political writers, John Harris, had this to say about Kerry's rhetorical skills in a piece dated March 26 and entitled 'When Kerry's Worlds Obscure His Message.'

The fear among some Kerry backers is that muddied language from Kerry – at a time when he is still not well known among most voters – will also cloud the policy distinctions he needs to unseat Bush, and make it easier for Republicans to promote their less flattering definition of what the Democrat represents.

A windy, portentous speaking style, “just screams out ‘politician,’” said Paul Glastris, a former speechwriter for Clinton and now editor of the *Washington Monthly* magazine. Glastris said he hopes the candidate learns that “less is more.”

“If he sounds like he's Senator Foghorn – in love with his own voice – it signals an old-fashioned insiderness,” and implicitly signals to voters “with John Kerry you're not going to get the change he says you're going to get.”

Roderick Hart, who studies political communication at the University of Texas, said that in addition to the ideological contrasts before voters this fall, there will be two distinct styles of persuasion, “The president is a reductionist,” whose guttural style – as when he said he wanted Osama bin Laden “dead or alive” – strikes some as inarticulate but usually leaves his meaning clear, Hart said. Kerry, by contract, “wants to develop the full complexity of the thought.” Although academics like him might find this admirable, Hart said, “my sense is that musing aloud is almost never attractive to the American people.”

Of course, we do not now know who will represent the Democrats in the Vice Presidential debate. But it is difficult to imagine that Kerry will find someone who will do any better in a face off with Dick Cheney than Joe Lieberman did four years ago when he came in second place.

Only time will tell, of course. In the meantime, Steve and I will stick by our early and unwavering prediction that, despite the growing chorus of voices forecasting a Kerry victory, George Bush will win handily next November.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

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