

# 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

"This is the thing, you see, you must stay militarily strong, with an undeniable strength. The importance of this cannot be exaggerated."

- Lady Thatcher to Peggy Noonan, as quoted in Noonan's June 14 column, "The Ben Elliott Story: What I Saw at the Funeral"

**BACK TO POLITICS IN THE WAKE OF THE REAGAN FUNERAL.** After a week such as the last one, writing this newsletter is a difficult task. There was only one story that really mattered. And not only were literally reams and reams of material written about it over the last nine days, but much of it was excellent, and much of it was written by people who not only knew President Reagan, but knew him well. I, on the other hand, was in fifth grade when Ronald Reagan took office, so I am not terribly sure that there is a whole lot for me to add to the seemingly endless, but nonetheless fitting discussion of the man, his Presidency, and his legacy. So this week, rather than the usual lengthy essays, I offer a collection of thoughts on a handful of events from last week, some related to Reagan, some not.

**The Political Impact of President Reagan's Death.** By the end of the week, it was apparently no longer gauche to discuss openly the impact that President Reagan's death might have had on the current campaign. Journalists and pundits representing all viewpoints and all types of media weighed in on whether Reagan's death and the related memorial would help or hurt John Kerry and George W. Bush, respectively.

Consensus was not easy to find. In Kerry's case, for example, some suggested that the candidate would actually be helped, because the death of this erstwhile political adversary provided him the opportunity to appear "statesmanlike" and to set aside partisanship during a time of national mourning. Others suggested that the weeklong celebration of Reagan's life would hurt Kerry, in that it distracted people from the current campaign and, by extension, from him. Kerry is, according to this theory, a challenger who desperately needs as much "face time" with the American public as possible between now and November in order to "introduce" himself and his policy ideas to the voters.

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While both theories sound reasonable enough on the surface, I believe that *both* are wrong. I do not think that Reagan's death and related events will have any impact whatsoever on Kerry's campaign. I don't mean for this to sound totally dismissive of the presumptive Democratic nominee, but the fact is that he is not a particularly relevant variable in the electoral equation. Or to put this another way, it doesn't matter if he looks statesmanlike or not; and it doesn't matter if he is shoved off the front pages for a week, or two, or three. All that matters with regard to John Kerry and his shot to win the White House is George W. Bush. This campaign is, for all intents and purposes, a race between George W. Bush and not-George W. Bush. If Bush is doing well, Kerry has no shot. If Bush is not doing terribly well, Kerry could win.

Mark and I have written several times over the past three or four months that we believe John Kerry is an absolutely awful Presidential candidate. Part of the reason we believe him to be so is that he offers very little that might excite voters and compel them to vote for him over a generally popular and charismatic politician like George W. Bush. He has no compelling ideas, no compelling personality, no spirit, and little emotion.

Indeed, it has been well documented that Democratic primary voters preferred Kerry over any of the other candidates, most notably Howard Dean, because they believe him to be "electable." What is rarely mentioned, though, is that by "electable," voters meant that Kerry was the least likely to embarrass himself and the party between now and November. While Dean always seemed near the point of raving lunacy and John Edwards seemed like . . . well, the smarmy trial lawyer he is, Kerry seemed like a reasonably normal person, a Senator, a big-time politician.

This is, by the way, the reason that there have been so many stories (including one on the front page of yesterday's *Washington Post*) about how even at this late date, Democrats are not enthusiastic about Kerry or the campaign he's running. Yet, if he can keep from doing something stupid until November, he might win, and that's just about all the party expects of him. It is also a large part of the reason that Kerry's position on a great many issues, most notably those dealing with Iraq, the greater war on terror, and the military, could well be called "Bush Lite." Why, the Kerry campaign appears to have asked, would we want to take controversial positions on tough issues, when all we have to do is lie low and hope for the best (or worst, as the case may be)?

And while it remains to be seen whether such a "default candidate" strategy can be successful, it certainly insulates the candidate against such distractions as that created last week by President Reagan's death and that which will be produced by Bill Clinton's autobiography book tour, due to start later this month.

As for how President Reagan's death might affect George W. Bush's campaign, the range of opinions has been somewhat narrower and less assertive. One observation that I think makes sense was that the liberal media's enthusiastic yet somehow insincere embrace of the late 40<sup>th</sup> President last week was intended to make Bush look small by comparison. Our old friend Rich Galen called this "the soft insolence of insincere compliments." In his June 9 Mullings ([www.mullings.com](http://www.mullings.com)), Galen wrote the following about this thinly veiled invective:

Two things: First, the implication is that the current crop of conservatives led by one George Walker Bush are different from Ronald W. Reagan because they don't reach out across the aisle to include Democrats in formulating programs which give something to each. This is the modern equivalent of "I knew Ronald Reagan; Ronald Reagan was a friend of mine; you're no Ronald Reagan." Second, this *kumbaya* rewriting of American history by Democrats is, in the immortal words of Sherman Potter, "Horse hockey." . . .

As Galen notes, the goal in all of this was, of course, to discredit the Bush crowd and its war on terror. Yes, Reagan was a hard-liner, they all say, but he was a successful hard-liner because he, unlike Bush, was also sweet, funny, and inclined to bipartisanship. Galen put it this way:

If they can somehow get it into the public's mind that President Reagan was their all-time favorite Republican President because he was somehow easier to get along with than these hard-liners around President Bush, they can make the case that President Bush will not – cannot – be as successful.

I, for one, don't think it will work. I would not go as far as to say that Bush can expect a boost in his poll numbers from the comparisons to Reagan, but I certainly don't think such comparisons will hurt him. Indeed, I think Bush benefits when Republicans in particular and the nation in general are reminded of the words Reagan used to describe the Cold War, and the strong notions of morality, liberty, and freedom that played into his and his administration's Soviet strategy.

For months now, the carping on the fringe right has been that Bush's endeavor in Iraq is "Wilsonian," in the worst sense of the word. Like Woodrow Wilson, his critics allege, Bush is obsessed with trying to "make the world safe for democracy" and, in the process, is weakening America. These same critics, along with a good number of the administration's detractors on the left, have also suggested that Bush's pursuit of "liberty," "freedom," and "democracy" is not only futile, but is guided by a mysterious cabal of "neoconservatives."

If anything, last week's Reagan-fest should either silence these critics or, at the very least, compel them to polish up their arguments so as not to look foolish. It was, once again, made clear last week that Bush is not emulating Wilson in either strategy or rhetoric. When the President talks about freedom, liberty, and the right of all men to government by consent, it is clearly from the Gipper's playbook that he is reading. And as for the charge of nefarious "neoconservatism," it should also be clear after last week, that such labeling of the Bush foreign policy is little more than an attempt to discredit the administration through misinformation. Indeed, by most definitions of the admittedly nebulous term, it is Reagan, not Bush who should be saddled with the label.

Before the start of the war on terror, the various meanings of the term "neoconservative" included: a conservative who began political life as a liberal, but moved right (e.g. onetime Democrat Ronald Reagan); a staunch opponent of Stalinism in particular and Communism in general (e.g. Reagan); and a conservative who nonetheless believes in using the power of the state to achieve good ends (e.g. using the state and the military to destroy the Soviet empire). Today, though, the term has been distorted by Bush opponents who have taken advantage of the facts that the Bush foreign policy is centered in the Middle East and that the architects of that

policy have names like Pearl and Wolfowitz to spin wild conspiracy theories about misplaced loyalties and collusion with foreign agents.

Of course, in reality, neither Reagan nor Bush is much of a neoconservative. Reagan's foreign policy was conservative – just plain conservative with no prefix necessary. And Bush's foreign policy is, in many ways, “Reagan-esque,” at least in rationale and rhetoric. And while it is doubtful that the reminder of such provided by last week's commemoration of Reagan will provide anything like the “boost” Bush loyalists may hope, it is very unlikely to hurt.

**Kerry's Running Mate.** Over the weekend, several news outlets reported that Senator John McCain had officially and definitively rejected John Kerry's overtures regarding the number-two slot on the Democratic presidential ticket this fall. It is difficult to tell just how serious this flirtation was, since all reports were attributed to “anonymous sources close to the campaign.” Some claim that Kerry desperately wanted his friend and fellow Vietnam vet on the ticket and that the two discussed it seriously, while others, including McCain himself, say that the Arizonan is a loyal Republican and supporter of President Bush, who never had any intention whatsoever of accepting any invitation to be Kerry's running mate. Whatever the case, the making of such a big and public deal about McCain was, I think, a serious miscalculation by the Kerry team, one of the very few they have made thus far.

For starters, as I have mentioned before in these pages, it strikes me as odd strategy for the Democratic nominee to advertise the fact that he feels uncomfortable choosing anyone in his own party to be his running mate, or his Defense Secretary, depending on the “rumor of the week.” If Kerry doesn't trust his fellow Democrats to lead the country and would therefore choose a pro-life, pro-gun, budget hawk over anyone in his party, then why should voters feel comfortable voting for any Democrat, including Kerry himself?

A second problem that Kerry faces now that the McCain gambit has been “leaked” to the press is one of expectations. It seems a bit odd to me that a campaign that is struggling to generate any sort of excitement, even among its base voters, would want to make its final choice of running mate look dull, uninspired, and a letdown compared to “the one that got away.”

Short of Miss Hillary herself, anyone Kerry chooses now is, almost by definition, going to be a disappointment. No matter what John Edwards' people claim, it is unlikely that Democrats, who appear to be motivated by little else than the prospect of victory over George W. Bush, will see the North Carolina Senator as anything but an enormous dud after having McCain and seemingly certain victory dangled in front of them. And the same goes for Richardson, Vilsack, and Gephardt, each of whom may be a competent politician, but none of whom will generate much excitement outside of his immediate family.

**The Media and Iraq.** Thus far, I have been loath to give much credence to GOP complaints that the media is undermining the war effort. Though some on the fringes of the left, such as Seymour Hirsh, have worked actively against the war, most of the media appear, as they claim, simply to be covering those aspects of it that are newsworthy, even as newsworthiness in time of war is usually defined as “casualties” and mayhem. Over the last couple of weeks, though, it has become more and more difficult not to suspect that even the mainstream press is making a concerted effort to emphasize the negative over the positive in Iraq.

First, there is the matter of whether coalition forces are welcome there. Much has been made of ill-conceived pre-war expectations that U.S. troops would be warmly received. And clearly, someone misjudged the affection most Iraqis would feel toward the occupying force. That said, a significant number of Iraqis would appear to be quite happy to have Saddam gone and more than willing to have U.S. troops stay until civil order is restored and Baathist and al-Qaeda elements are purged. Yet, to hear the mainstream press tell the story, it would seem that every Iraq man, woman, and child hates America and wants U.S. troops out of their country forthwith.

Take, for example, a story from Saturday's *Washington Post* in which *five* young men from Baghdad were quoted expressing their displeasure with the American "occupation," as they stood around viewing the aftermath of a car bomb attack on a military convoy. One was, according to the *Post*, a "laborer" and another a "worker," yet the *Post* thought that their collective complaints were so "devastating" for what they "told about Iraqis' attitudes toward the 13-month-old U.S. occupation" that they deserved to grace the front page of the paper.

Were these five men representative of the entire nation? And if so, how so? Were they particularly well informed? Did they represent a cross section of the society? Or were their comments chosen because their views would undermine American support for the war effort by making them seem ungrateful and thus make the cause of helping them seem impossible?

If the folks at the *Post* were simply looking for random men to quote, why, one might wonder, didn't they think to quote a guy named Iyad Allawi, who recently said, "I would like to record our profound gratitude and appreciation to the U.S.-led international coalition, which has made great sacrifices for the liberation of Iraq," or another guy named Hoshiyar Zebari, who declared, "We Iraqis are grateful to the coalition who helped liberate us from the persecution of Saddam Hussein's regime. We thank President Bush and Prime Minister Blair for their dedication and commitment"? But then, I suppose the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the new Iraqi government just aren't as important to the *Post* as a "worker" and "laborer" who are contrite.

Of course this "why are we there" theme is nothing compared to the "we're the real bad guys" theme that is the outgrowth of the Abu Ghraib scandal. Under most circumstances, I would be reluctant to accuse the folks at the *New York Times* of having a dangerous obsession, but the paper seems more than a little fixated on prison abuse stories, having carried a front-page Abu Ghraib-related piece on 44 of the last 47 days. And the *Times* is hardly the only paper at which obsession with Abu Ghraib appears to be a real malady. OpinionJournal's James Taranto writes a regular feature in his "Best of the Web" column in which he documents the strange and extraneous references to Abu Ghraib that pervade the mainstream press. As a sign of just how far this obsession has progressed, the most recent such reference cited by Taranto was in a *Dallas Morning News* review of a new movie based on the "Garfield" comic strip.

Certainly, as Mark and I have noted in these pages, the abuses that took place at Abu Ghraib were outrageous. But in its attempt to keep the story alive, place the blame directly on Donald Rumsfeld and/or Dick Cheney, and portray the United States as a demented adherent of Marquis de Sade, the liberal media seems to have gone from the genuine to the absurd.

For example, in reporting the latest “outrage” the *New York Times* last week catalogued in the most alarming manner the type of harsh measures to which prisoners such as those kept at Abu Ghraib could be subjected, as outlined in memos from the Defense Department.

I urge those with weak stomachs not to read on. According to the *Times*, “Mr. Rumsfeld approved a set of harsher interrogation techniques in December 2002 to use on a Saudi detainee, Mohamed al-Kahtani, who was believed to be the planned 20th hijacker in the Sept. 11 terror plot.” And what, precisely were these harsher measures? Again, according to the *Times*, they included, “serving the detainee cold, prepackaged food instead of hot rations and shaving off his facial hair.” As Kurtz would have put it, “The Horror! The horror!”

Over the weekend, *The Washington Post* also ran a story about new memos highlighting “acceptable” prison abuses” carried out by American servicemen at the behest of their civilian superiors at the Pentagon, this time at Guantanamo Bay. Here again, the allegations are truly horrifying. To wit:

The previously undisclosed memos provide one of the most complete pictures to date of life behind the “wire” at Guantanamo. The detainees wanted an extra pair of shorts to wear in the shower, for privacy. They asked that the call to prayer be broadcast in camp, but a CD player could not be found. They asked for tea with “lots of sugar.” The response: “Not now. However, we will reconsider in the future . . .”

The memos also document for the first time the precise nature of a number of long-standing concerns issued by the International Committee of the Red Cross over the treatment of suspected al Qaeda terrorists and Taliban fighters held at the base.

Among them: U.S. interrogators were placing detainees in isolation holds for as long as a month at a time for refusing to furnish information. Extraordinarily long interrogation sessions were having a “cumulative effect” on the mental health of the captives. And the reliance upon open-air cages instead of enclosed cells constituted inhumane treatment under the international laws of war.

Again, no one is going to deny that real, inexcusable abuses took place at Abu Ghraib. But to pretend that the conditions spelled out in these memos is shamefully “abusive” or, as George Soros recently claimed, is equivalent to the September 11 attacks, is just plain nuts. The really sad thing about all of this is that while the media appears to be straining ever harder to find new “atrocities” and documents that link those atrocities to big shots in the Bush administration, the public is likely losing interest. So while the mainstream press gets all worked up about the lack of hot food or missing CD players, the real scandals behind Abu Ghraib, and the social problems within U.S. society itself that led to them, will simply be forgotten.

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