

# 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

“After 9/11, let’s be fair here, if you had been President, you’d think, ‘Well, this fellow bin Laden just turned these three airplanes full of fuel into weapons of mass destruction, right?’ Arguably they were super-powerful chemical weapons. Think about it that way. So, you’re sitting there as President, you’re reeling in the aftermath of this, so, yeah, you want to go get bin Laden and do Afghanistan and all that. But you also have to say, Well, my first responsibility now is to try everything possible to make sure that this terrorist network and other terrorist networks cannot reach chemical and biological weapons or small amounts of fissile material. I’ve got to do that . . .

“That’s why I supported the Iraq thing. There was a lot of stuff unaccounted for. So I thought the President had an absolute responsibility to go to the U.N. and say, ‘Look, guys, after 9/11, you have got to demand that Saddam Hussein lets us finish the inspection process.’ You couldn’t responsibly ignore [the possibility that] a tyrant had these stocks.”

-- Former President Bill Clinton, *Time* magazine, June 28, 2004.

**DEMOCRATS AND DELUSIONS.** Mark and I have long noted that the differences between Republicans and Democrats are growing starker and starker, Ralph Nader’s protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. This has been evident in cultural issues for a long time. But the cultural component of political discourse has, since 9/11, been magnified so intensely that it has begun to dramatically affect such bread-and-butter issues as national security and foreign relations, much as it did during Vietnam and the height of the Cold War.

Over the past few days, several unrelated incidents have reinforced these differences between Republicans and Democrats and liberals and conservatives, making it almost impossible not to believe that one of the two parties is slowly but surely losing touch entirely with the hopes, dreams, and values of average Americans. Naturally, you know which side I believe that to be.

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This is a theme we have touched upon before. But as the election grows nearer and nearer, and the left's absolute desperation to defeat George W. Bush grows greater and greater, the liberal mindset grows curiouser and curiouser. Among the many manifestations of this phenomenon is the left's newly found propensity to concoct wild fantasies involving the concept that everything that happens is good for Kerry and bad for George Bush. Many of these fantasies are borderline delusional, and they may well have the net effect of lulling Democrats into a false sense of security, believing that all is well for their side, when it is not.

Let's start, for example, with the big political story of the week, the release of Michael Moore's new film, "Fahrenheit 9/11," an anti-Bush screed that has wowed critics and won over tough, hard sell audiences all over France. Moore appears to fancy himself a mighty political force, yet he professes to be but a humble filmmaker. And his fans, for their part, think him a genius, believing that he is the only man "brave" enough to tell to the truth about the war on terror and that he will be rewarded for his courage by providing the final nail in the coffin of George W. Bush's presidency.

I, in contrast, can't help but think this is all nuts. Moore is a capable filmmaker and was, at one time, mildly amusing. But he is also an egomaniacal phony whose films, particularly "Fahrenheit 9/11," are riddled with inaccuracies and logical inconsistencies, and constitute little more than political propaganda. In order for Fahrenheit to be the election-altering blockbuster Moore believes it to be, it would have to contain actual blockbusting revelations about the nefarious goings on in the Bush White House. But it does not.

Consider, if you will, the following, which is long, but says just about all that you'll ever need to know about Moore, his new film "Fahrenheit 9/11," and those who would believe anything he says. And as you read these words, note that they were written not by some right-wing crank, but by Christopher Hitchens, who has been very good on the war on terror, but before 9/11 was considered one of the more eloquent and influential leftist (yes, leftist, not liberal) commentators around. To wit:

To describe this film as dishonest and demagogic would almost be to promote those terms to the level of respectability. To describe this film as a piece of crap would be to run the risk of a discourse that would never again rise above the excremental. To describe it as an exercise in facile crowd-pleasing would be too obvious. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a sinister exercise in moral frivolity, crudely disguised as an exercise in seriousness. It is also a spectacle of abject political cowardice masking itself as a demonstration of "dissenting" bravery . . .

*Fahrenheit 9/11* makes the following points about Bin Laden and about Afghanistan, and makes them in this order:

- 1) The Bin Laden family (if not *exactly* Osama himself) had a close if convoluted business relationship with the Bush family, through the Carlyle Group.
- 2) Saudi capital in general is a very large element of foreign investment in the United States.

- 3) The Unocal company in Texas had been willing to discuss a gas pipeline across Afghanistan with the Taliban, as had other vested interests.
- 4) The Bush administration sent far too *few* ground troops to Afghanistan and thus allowed far too many Taliban and al-Qaida members to escape.
- 5) The Afghan government, in supporting the coalition in Iraq, was purely risible in that its non-army was purely American.
- 6) The American lives lost in Afghanistan have been wasted. (This I divine from the fact that this supposedly “antiwar” film is dedicated ruefully to all those killed there, as well as in Iraq.)

It must be evident to anyone, despite the rapid-fire way in which Moore’s direction eases the audience hastily past the contradictions, that these discrepant scatter shots do not cohere at any point. Either the Saudis run U.S. policy (through family ties or overwhelming economic interest), or they do not. As allies and patrons of the Taliban regime, they either opposed Bush’s removal of it, or they did not. (They opposed the removal, all right: They wouldn’t even let Tony Blair land his own plane on their soil at the time of the operation.) Either we sent too many troops, or were wrong to send any at all—the latter was Moore’s view as late as 2002—or we sent too few. If we were going to make sure no Taliban or al-Qaida forces survived or escaped, we would have had to be more ruthless than I suspect that Mr. Moore is really recommending. And these are simply observations on what is “in” the film. If we turn to the facts that are deliberately left out, we discover that there is an emerging Afghan army, that the country is now a joint NATO responsibility and thus under the protection of the broadest military alliance in history, that it has a new constitution and is preparing against hellish odds to hold a general election, and that at least a million and a half of its former refugees have opted to return. I don’t think a pipeline is being constructed yet, not that Afghanistan couldn’t do with a pipeline. But a highway from Kabul to Kandahar—an insurance against warlordism and a condition of nation-building—is nearing completion with infinite labor and risk. We also discover that the parties of the Afghan secular left—like the parties of the Iraqi secular left—are strongly in favor of the regime change. But this is not the sort of irony in which Moore chooses to deal . . .

Moore has announced that he won’t even appear on TV shows where he might face hostile questioning. I notice from the *New York Times* of June 20 that he has pompously established a rapid response team, and a fact-checking staff, and some tough lawyers, to bulwark himself against attack. He’ll sue, Moore says, if anyone insults him or his pet. Some right-wing hack groups, I gather, are planning to bring pressure on their local movie theaters to drop the film. How dumb or thuggish do you have to be in order to counter one form of stupidity and cowardice with another? By all means go and see this terrible film, and take your friends, and if the fools in the audience strike up one cry, in favor of surrender or defeat, feel free to join in the conversation.

However, I think we can agree that the film is so flat-out phony that “fact-checking” is beside the point. And as for the scary lawyers—get a life, or maybe see me in court.

Given all of this, it is pretty obvious that Moore's film is going to be an instant classic among those on the loony left who care little about the truth (or even the concept of the truth) and traffic in the vilest and most hateful slurs against the administration. And based on that alone, one would expect that respectable Democrats would want to do the smart thing and stay as far away from the movie as possible, allowing it to do any "good" it can, but not permitting themselves to be tied to the radical fringe that supports it and whose ideas find expression in it. Of course, in this case, one would also be wrong.

The U.S. premier of "Fahrenheit 9/11" in Washington last week brought out the usual wacky celebrity luminaries, but also brought at least 12 Democratic Senators (that's a full quarter of the caucus, if you're counting), a large contingent from the Congressional Black Caucus, and the chairman of the Democratic National Committee himself. And as if that weren't bad enough, many Democrats actually talked to the press afterward. DNC Chairman Terry McAuliffe told *National Review's* Byron York after the film that he thought it was "very powerful, much more powerful than I thought it would be." He also told CNN, "I think anyone who goes to see this movie will come out *en masse* and vote for John Kerry."

Since at least January of 2000, Mark and I have called McAuliffe "amazingly politically tone deaf," but even we were unprepared for this kind of stupidity (and no, I'm not just talking about his apparent belief that *anyone* can do something *en masse*). By showing up at the premier and by reviewing the film favorably for the media, McAuliffe has, however unwittingly, affiliated his party with the ideas presented therein. And in addition to being entirely misleading, those ideas are likely to be considered offensive by a great many voting Americans, regardless of partisan affiliation. If John Kerry loses this election (and I believe he will), he may well look back and realize that his biggest mistake was deferring to Bill Clinton by leaving Bill's bag man in charge of the party through November.

Now, I know that Moore and his distributors spent this weekend patting themselves on the back for the "hit" that they believe "Fahrenheit" was over the weekend, blathering on about standing ovations, sold-out theaters, and the unexpected success in "red states." But in their desire to claim political omnipotence, these folks all seem to have overlooked the salient fact that this film has a ready-made audience of Bush haters, and those are precisely the people who would line up to see the movie on its opening weekend. Other than a little bit of anecdotal evidence, I have no way of proving this, but I would guess that the percentage of "Fahrenheit" viewers planning to vote for Kerry (or Nader, I suppose) before seeing the film was exactly the same as the percentage of voters planning to vote for Kerry after the film. The audience is self selecting.

Michael Moore was once an ordinary, modestly clever, left-leaning documentary maker who made movies that he hoped would make people think. Today, he is a supercilious gasbag who is under odd misimpression that he has both the ability and responsibility to tell people what to think. As for Terry McAuliffe, he was once a politically dim fundraiser for an ethically suspect organization (Bill Clinton's DNC). Today he is still a politically dim fundraiser for an ethically suspect organization, but now he has the authority to speak for the entire party, a responsibility I expect most Democrats will, after all is said and done, regret having given him.

Of course as dim and delusional as McAuliffe appears to be, he is likely far smarter and far more rational than the people who keep bringing Al Gore to New York and Washington to make “important” foreign and environmental policy speeches. I understand that one of the key aspects of the left’s strategy to unseat the President is to remind voters that Bush “should not” have won in 2000, and to argue that this “illegitimate” presidency must therefore be ended now. But I hardly think that trotting out the most identifiable political loser in recent memory is going to prove a particularly effective means of stirring up anti-Bush sentiment. Indeed, I think it is more likely to remind a good many voters why exactly they voted for Bush in the first place.

There is no question that Gore was, last time around, personally unlikable. He had been Vice President during what then appeared to be an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity, and he was largely unscarred by Bill Clinton’s ethical frailties. As such, he should have been a virtual shoe-in. But he was nevertheless rejected by half the voting population, including that in his home state, and was sent off to find other work.

And there is also no question that Gore has become even more odious in the four years since. He was talked out of running for his party’s nomination by party elders who knew that he would prove a disastrous two-time loser; he endorsed the fringe candidacy of Howard Dean shortly before that campaign completely collapsed; and he has espoused beliefs about the President, the war on terror, and the war in Iraq that would erstwhile be relegated to the radical extremes. Last week, he was, for reasons that are beyond me, trotted out yet again to make another speech about how awful George W. Bush is. And yet again, he did little other than make himself look small, bitter, and completely unhinged.

This time around, Gore went even further than before, taking up the last redoubt of desperate and defeated politicians everywhere, calling his opponents Nazis. Specifically, he said:

The [Bush] administration works closely with a network of “rapid response” digital brownshirts who work to pressure reporters and their editors for “undermining support for our troops.” [Former Enron adviser] Paul Krugman, the *New York Times* columnist, was one of the first journalists to regularly expose the President’s consistent distortions of the facts. Krugman writes, “Let’s not overlook the role of intimidation. After 9/11, if you were thinking of saying anything negative of the President . . . you had to expect right-wing pundits and publications to do all they could to ruin your reputation.”

On one hand, this was really rather unremarkable, since the left has been calling Republicans “Nazis” for decades and the anti-warriors on the fringe left have been calling Bush “Hitler” since at least the invasion of Afghanistan. Yet, on the other hand, Gore is not some whacko leftist, and he is not just any old Democrat. He is the former Vice President, the party’s last presidential nominee, and a likely featured speaker at this year’s Democratic convention. And all of that makes this significant. As blogger James Lileks put it:

Today Al Gore upped the ante. He coined a new term for the Internet critics of his positions: digital brownshirts. Yes, yes, it’s over the top. But it’s not the sentiment that raises eyebrows, it’s the position of the person who’s saying it. We don’t expect presidential candidates past or present to indulge in Usenet flame-war lingo. We don’t expect serious party elders to call the other side Nazis, and for good reason: it’s

obscene. The brownshirts were evil. The brownshirts kicked the Jews in the streets and made the little kids put their hands on their heads as they stumbled off to the trains. The brownshirts were not interested in refuting arguments. They were interested in killing the people who dared argue at all.

I don't know why exactly anyone still believes Al Gore's opinions matter, or why some Democrats feel it necessary to continue to publicize those opinions, even as they grow more and more reckless. But do I suspect that John Kerry wishes these people would find something else to do with their time. By putting a manifestly angry, bitter, and potentially unstable man onstage and promoting his views, Gore's promoters are reminding voters of precisely that side of the Democratic Party that John Kerry would rather they forget. Gore, like Moore, has absconded to the radical fringes of his party and any perceived affiliation with the ideas prevalent on that fringe is something mainstream Democrats would do well to avoid.

The funny thing, as we have noted before, is that while several prominent Democrats seem to have figured this out, they have been unable or, in a couple of cases, unwilling to get the message to the rest of the party or to its surrogates in the media. Bill Clinton gets it, as does his wife, the junior Senator from New York. And more and more it looks like John Kerry might even get it. But not many others do. Many in the party and in the media continue to hammer away at themes that are unlikely to win converts to the Democratic cause and may well even spawn sympathy for the Bush team. Yet they continue to believe that this is what they must do win the election.

And even with Moore and Gore leading the bitter masses to believe that all is well, the incident that best exemplified this stubborn misbelief last week was that which transpired between Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator Pat Leahy at the Senate "class picture." As was widely reported in the press, Cheney and Leahy had a rather terse exchange of words on such issues as Leahy's unremitting accusations that the war in Iraq is about profiteering for Halliburton and Senate Democrats' stubbornness in blocking the administration's judicial nominees. The exchange ended with the Vice President telling Leahy in a decidedly crude manner to perform an anatomically impossible act.

Now, the mainstream media immediately reacted with concern about the decline of "civility" among public officials in the current political atmosphere. Citing several incidents in which Republicans had grown terse with their Democratic colleagues and even a couple of other incidents of swearing, the Associated Press's Jim Abrams declared that "lawmakers from both parties lament what has become . . . [a] low point in political civility."

Yesterday morning, *New York Times* columnist and liberal bellwether Maureen Dowd took things a step further, suggesting that not only has the Bush administration grown increasingly uncivil, but that this incivility, as manifested by Cheney's outburst, is proof that the administration is shrinking into a bunker-like shell -- encircled, gloomy, and contentious. She put it thusly:

Even as Tom Daschle proposed bipartisan family retreats to heal the harsh mood, even as the Senate passed the "Defense of Decency Act," Mr. Cheney profanely laced into Mr. Leahy for criticizing Halliburton's getting no-bid contracts . . .

He said he had no regrets about his “little floor debate in the United States Senate.” He didn’t want to go along with Mr. Leahy’s attitude that “everything’s peaches and cream” when the Democrats had just been jawing about Halliburton war profiteering. Peaches and cream have never been on the Bush-Cheney menu, only brimstone and gall.

By playing on the insecurities of an inexperienced leader, Mr. Cheney has managed to change W. from a sunny, open, bipartisan, uniter-not-a-divider, non-nation-builder into a crabby, secretive, partisan, divider-not-a-uniter, inept imperialist. Vice is bounding around the country, talking to his usual circumscribed audiences of conservatives, right-wing think tanks and Fox News anchors. No need to burrow in the bunker when you’ve turned America into one.

As they used to say about the Soviet Union, the defensive Bush imperialists have to keep expanding because they’re encircled. Mr. Cheney’s gloomy, scary, contentious world view has fueled a more gloomy, scary, contentious world.

Now it is generally true that angry, irrational, and uncivil public outbursts can be a sure sign of political desperation. But by all accounts Cheney’s comment to Leahy, while uncivil, did not appear to be motivated by either anger or desperation, but by a long-standing low regard for a Senator whose record on foreign policy matters is badly tinged with such disgraceful behavior that he was in 1987 forced to step down as vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, but who still has the chutzpah to challenge the integrity of others.

But even more importantly, one wonders if it has ever occurred to Ms. Dowd or the folks at the AP that the Republicans are not exactly the aggressors in this “uncivil war.” Since 9/11, Democrats in Congress have accused members of the Bush administration of the following: profiting financially from the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon; waging war in order to create further profits for buddies in the oil industry; indulging “the Jews” by aggressively waging war on Islam; indulging the Saudis by not aggressively waging war on Islam; lying to the American people in order to fashion support for war; sanctioning torture comparable to that conducted by Saddam Hussein’s regime; killing innocent women and children; etc., etc. Democrats outside of Congress, of course, have accused the Bush team of all of this and worse. Yet somehow, the AP discovers that things have grown “uncivil” only after the Vice President tells off one of his most vociferous and prolific accusers.

While Mark and I consider it unlikely, it is, of course, possible that John Kerry will be victorious in November. But if this happens, it will not be because of Michael Moore’s movie, Al Gore’s spurious likening of the GOP to the Nazis, or Terry McAuliffe’s new found radicalism. Nor will historians argue that the Republican defeat was telegraphed by Dick Cheney’s frustration with a long-discredited Democratic backbencher. Bush’s defeat, should it occur, will come because he will have lost the most important gamble of his presidency, namely his high stakes, military venture into the very heart of the Middle East.

But this fact does not render the above examples of curious behavior within the Democratic Party irrelevant to the discussion of American politics today. As unthinkable as it sounds, things could actually go poorly for President Bush between now and the election and he could still end up

winning, if, that is, the fringe elements within the party continue to foist their loathsome beliefs on a nation unprepared for such radicalization of its politics.

It is worth remembering, as Mark and I among many others have noted before, that even when the radical elements within the Democratic party were at the previous pinnacle of their power, near the end of the Vietnam War, the party suffered a disquieting electoral setback at the hands of a mediocre president and a public that was simply unwilling to side with the radicals.

Of course it is also worth remembering that while they lost the election in 1972, the radicals largely won the battle for the party's soul, and within the decade had sent it into a death spiral that essentially continues today, save the eight years of the Clinton Renaissance.

The current war has, of course, reanimated the principals in this battle for the Democratic Party's soul, only this time the radicals are not solely comprised of a ragtag bunch of unshaven kids. Today the radicals are not just highly motivated, but very well financed. And regardless of how this election turns out, there is a good chance that they will increase their influence within the party after November 2. Should Kerry win, they'll claim credit for the victory. Should he lose, they'll assert that the loss was proof positive that Democratic centrism is a failure.

Thus, the argument that their extremism might cost Kerry the White House is not likely to act as a moderating influence on them. And this, I think, is more than sufficient to keep Kerry awake nights.

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