

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

“In Lowith’s estimation, the delusionary excesses of the two world wars, of the Nazi regime, and of that generation of German anti-democratic thinkers who intellectually prepared the way for German fascism are all inseparable from the phenomenon of “European nihilism” — a nineteenth century inheritance that was appropriated and radicalized in the twentieth. Over the course of the nineteenth century, argues Lowith, Europe lost touch with its traditional spiritual moorings, paving the way for a faithless political and intellectual radicalism. In this context the Greek concept of *sophrosyne* (moderation) or the medieval Christian notion of the subordination of human purposes to a series of superior, divinely ordained ends would become meaningless.”

-- Richard Wolin’s introduction to the 1995 English translation and publication of a series of Karl Lowith’s essays under the title, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*.

KERRY’S EUROPEAN PARTNERS. Last week, I outlined my belief that President Bush will escalate the war on terror dramatically after the election, including air strikes and possibly even military incursions into Iran, if that is the only way to stop that nation from pursuing a nuclear weapons program and aggressively attempting to undermine the new government in Iraq. That article elicited an interesting and troubling e-mail from a good friend whose views I both respect and value. Her complaint was that the opening paragraphs were so anti-Bush that they “could have been written by James Carville.”

My intention when writing those paragraphs was to present a hardheaded prediction of what I think is coming and to advise readers to begin to factor this possibility into their long-term investment views. But I must say that I had no idea that anyone would interpret them as being anti-Bush, since I personally see nothing wrong with him becoming more aggressive. After reading my friend’s e-mail though, I realized that James Carville could indeed have made the same prediction as an indictment against Bush, given that his liberal constituency fears the President for the very reasons that Republican hawks such as I like him.

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I bring this up as an introduction to this week's article because I am about to discuss in some depth another observation I made last week, which I now realize, but didn't then, could similarly be interpreted in diametrically opposed ways depending upon one's politics. The observation in question was that Kerry would, if elected, move much more slowly and cautiously than George Bush in the "war on terror" simply because he has pledged to make multilateralism a centerpiece of his foreign policy, especially emphasizing closer relations with the Europeans.

Carville, no doubt, could promote this thought as being pro-Kerry. I would argue otherwise, not because I am in favor of impetuous, unilateral military action, but because I think that Kerry's promise to pursue better relations with the European powers, primarily France and Germany, carries with it very real dangers, no apparent benefits, and no chance whatsoever of success.

In fact, my guess is that Kerry hasn't really thought much about what he is promising here, but stumbled into this position as a reaction to the widespread criticism Bush received when France and Germany opposed his efforts to get U.N. backing for military action for the invasion of Iraq. In the face of this criticism, Kerry quite naturally maintained that he would have managed to keep these long-time allies on board if he had been in Bush's shoes, and this claim has resonated so well with voters that it has become a central issue in his campaign.

What no one seems to be considering, however, is that efforts to bring France and Germany into the U.S. camp on Middle East issues would likely involve a long period of negotiations with European leaders that could raise potentially dangerous and misleading questions about America's commitment to Israel, to the war in Iraq, and to its aggressive approach to militant Islam. In addition, it could cause Kerry to delay taking actions that might be necessary to avoid future problems. And finally, it most certainly would result in a failure that could exacerbate the schism between Europe and the United States rather than allow it to settle into a natural and relatively benign "agreement to disagree," as it currently appears to be doing.

Bush's critics can maintain, and Kerry may believe, that the source of the tension between Europe and the United States is exclusively related to a widespread dislike for Bush himself among European leaders, and that Kerry could bring them around with a combination of charm, understanding, and public displays of respect. But this is almost certainly not true.

Yes, of course, Europeans dislike Bush. And they may warm up to Kerry on a personal level if he is elected. But the primary source of their anger and distress with George Bush is substantive, not personal, having to do with highly significant disagreements over nothing less than the question of how best to avoid, manage, or win what Samuel Huntington once described as the coming "clash of civilizations."

A comprehensive review of the differences between the United States and Europe on this issue is well beyond the scope of this article. But suffice it to say that the Europeans, for a variety of demographic and deeply ingrained cultural reasons, are much more sympathetic to the Muslim side in the various disputes in which radical Islam is involved and much more antagonistic toward Israel's role in these disputes than the United States is.

Regarding this last point, while the Europeans always proclaim their belief that Israel has a right to exist, they are also always highly critical of the Jewish state's efforts to ensure its existence against its Muslim enemies, and much more receptive to Muslim claims that the best defense against Islamic terrorism is to take a "more balanced approach" to the Arab-Israeli conflict than that taken by the United States.

And while these differences have varied in intensity over the past 50 years, the basic positions taken by Europe and the United States have remained substantially unchanged since Israel was created in 1948. These differences were of secondary importance to relations between America and Europe until recently, when the question of how to respond to the rise of militant Islam and to the events of September 11 brought them to the forefront of the relationship.

It is worth noting that Kerry's plan to achieve better relations with Europe do appear to involve adjusting America's basic policies concerning Israel and the war against militant Islam. In fact, according to his website, he is firmly committed to a laundry list of policies that are largely responsible for Europe's unhappiness with the United States. They include maintaining a "special relationship with and steady policy of friendship and support for Israel;" taking "immediate measures to prevent Iraq from becoming a failed state that inevitably would become a haven for terrorists and a destabilizing force in the Middle East;" utilizing "every available resource to get the terrorists before they can strike at us;" winning "the global war against terror;" stopping "the spread of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons;" and promoting "democracy, freedom, and opportunity around the world."

Indeed, Kerry seems to believe that the key to improving relations with Europe is strictly a matter of behavioral modification on the part of the United States. America, he says, must stop "bullying" the rest of the world and make a greater effort than Bush has done, to "rally" others to the American cause.

As I said earlier, I think this is nonsense. I think Europe's position vis-à-vis militant Islam is solidly based on a combination of contemporary demographical problems and some very old cultural attitudes toward Jews and Judaism, and that neither of these is likely to change, regardless of whether George Bush or John Kerry is President of the United States.

As for the demographic issue, much has been written in these pages and elsewhere about the social, economic and security problems facing Europe as a result of the large, unassimilated, and increasingly radicalized Muslims in their major cities, so I will only note that this intensely anti-American population has formed a powerful, multi-faceted, political incentive for European politicians to spurn traditional European-American cooperation, which has been made easier by the declining practical importance of this relationship since the end of the Cold War.

Integral to this new reality is Europe's intense and growing need for immigrant labor from Muslim nations, its history of colonial involvement in the affairs of Muslim nations in North Africa and the Middle East, and its long, sordid history of anti-Semitism, which has played a major role in European politics for centuries.

The importance of this latter phenomenon to European politics is difficult for most Americans to grasp. They are, of course, familiar with anti-Semitism as one of a number of common, if not

widespread, prejudices. But anti-Semitism is so inconsequential to the political development of the United States that it is safe to say that an individual could pursue a thorough study of U.S. political history from the founding to the present and not encounter a single meaningful link between anti-Semitism and any important U.S. political movement.

In contrast, anti-Semitism has had an overwhelming influence on the *political* history of every major nation on the continent of Europe. Or as Ernst Nolte put it in his well-known book, *Three Faces of Fascism*, “every significant ideology of the nineteenth century [Europe] had its own brand of anti-Semitism.”

In France, for example, anti-Semitism has been an integral part of society since well before the revolution in 1789, and a significant factor in French politics since the last third of the 19th century. Indeed, a good argument could be made that Italian and German fascism trace their roots to the publication in 1898 of the infamous article entitled “First Blood,” in which Charles Maurras launched his entirely fictional attack on the Dreyfusards, and in doing so gave birth to France’s rabidly anti-Semitic fascist movement, Action Francaise, which was a significant factor in French politics until the German fascists invaded France at the beginning of World War II.

And while it is popular in the United States to consider Hitler’s anti-Semitism as springing full-blown from the forehead of this homicidal maniac, like Athena from Zeus, the fact is that Hitler came by his anti-Semitism honestly, as the saying goes, following in the footsteps of a veritable parade of prominent German anti-Semites dating back to the opening days of the 19th century, in the person of the Johann Fichte, right on up to the early days of the 20th, in the persons of Gottfried Feder, Erich Ludendorff, Ernst Rohm, and Dietrich Eckart.

Now I am not saying here that the United States and Europe will not remain friendly and cooperative on a host of important global issues in the years to come. Nor do I expect Europe to stop cooperating in the quiet, behind-the-scenes war against Islamic terrorism, for Europe is arguably more vulnerable in this regard than the United States. But I think it is fair to say that John Kerry is delusional if he believes that he can “rally” Europe, with its growing population of radicalized Muslims and its historical antipathy toward Jews, to join publicly the United States and Israel in their fight against militant Islam on Middle Eastern soil.

In closing, I would note that the interesting thing about this situation is that, despite Kerry’s nail biting over this issue, Europe’s cooperation, or lack thereof, will make little or no difference in the eventual outcome of America’s dispute with militant Islam and terrorism.

Europe is, after all, in a steep decline as a political, military, economic, and cultural player on the world stage. Nor is it any longer a partner with the United States as a global showcase for Western values. And more importantly, it has neither the military power nor the global prestige to, as Kerry put it in his speech the other night, “share the burden, reduce the cost to American taxpayers, and reduce the risk to American soldiers,” to any important degree.

In short, while a James Carville could promote John Kerry’s promise to cozy up to America’s old-line allies in Europe, conservatives have good cause to view this promise with both skepticism and concern.

I'LL STAY WITH BUSH. For some time now, Mark and I have been saying that George W. Bush will win reelection on November 2 by a comfortable margin. This is, of course, different from what most of the pundit class has been saying. In fact, the belief that John Kerry will win in November, which was no more than speculative chatter a few months ago, appears to have become conventional wisdom in the wake of last week's Democratic National Convention.

And it is not merely Kerry partisans who believe that Democrats now hold the upper hand in this contest, but a great many highly respected and generally nonpartisan observers as well, including Charlie Cook, who is almost universally considered the most dependable and most respected pollster by Washington insiders, and John Zogby, whose polling has generally been the most accurate of all big-time pollsters over the last few election cycles, most especially in the 2000 presidential contest, when he alone predicted a Gore victory in the popular vote.

The principal force behind the negative outlook for the President's chances is the fact that his poll numbers are at this time lower than those of previous incumbents who went on to win reelection. While the numbers are still higher than were those of his father or Jimmy Carter, both of whom lost by sizeable margins, they are not as high as one would expect of a candidate with much of a chance to win, particularly since a number of factors tend to push "undecided" voters into the challenger's camp late in contests such as this.

Cook has consistently reported a close contest favoring Kerry, and last week, before the Democratic Convention had even begun, argued that "unless something happens to change the dynamics and circumstances of this race, Bush will lose." Cook also recently noted a fact that has been little mentioned by either the mainstream press or any other prominent pollsters, namely that the "Nader factor," which has generally been considered as a plus for Bush, could very well dissipate by Election Day.

Cook notes that since Nader's percentage of the vote in 2000 was considerably smaller than his pre-election poll numbers suggested, it is possible that Kerry's lead is actually bigger than it looks. Furthermore, Cook argues, that it is highly unlikely, as things stand today, that Nader will even be on the ballot in the majority of states this November.

As for Zogby, several months ago, just after Kerry had cinched the nomination and before Fallujah and Sadr City made Iraq a particularly tough issue for the President, he shocked most observers by becoming the first nonpartisan pollster to declare that Kerry was in charge of his own destiny and that this was his race to lose. Moreover, in one of the first post-convention polling reports in the nation, Zogby's analysis showed little or no "bounce" for John Kerry, but explicitly spelled out several notable challenges that President Bush faces. In the summary of the poll released on Friday, Zogby wrote:

The most recent Zogby poll shows deeper trouble for President George W. Bush beyond just the horserace. Mr. Bush has fallen in key areas while Senator John Kerry has shored up numerous constituencies in his base. The Bush team's attempted outreach to base Democratic and swing constituency has shown to be a failure thus far, limiting his potential growth in the electorate.

Nevertheless, I yet again wish not only to declare my belief that George Bush will win this election, but to say that I am increasingly confident of this prediction. And here's why.

The important thing to keep in mind when evaluating the efforts of folks like Cook and Zogby is that they are first and foremost pollsters, who, through the collection and interpretation of survey results, attempt to explain the current political atmosphere, the trends that have shaped that atmosphere, and the likely future atmosphere given the trend lines they have identified. But they are not, and to the best of my knowledge do not purport to be, analysts or forecasters who attempt to predict what political events might alter the trend lines, thereby altering the future atmosphere. That's our job.

In my opinion, the key phrase in understanding the current mainstream opinion among pollsters is the qualifying phrase from Cook's above-mentioned prediction, namely that Bush will lose "unless something happens to change the dynamics and circumstances of this race . . ." Though Cook doesn't say it, because it is beyond the purview of the service he provides, there will be several opportunities between now and election day for the "dynamics and circumstances" to be changed. Indeed, I would make the argument that both are changing as I write this.

Over the past two months or so, the jobs picture, which the Democrats have managed to turn into the most pertinent economic measure of this election cycle, has shown improvement. Over the same period of time, concerns about Iraq have lessened considerably. Moqtada al Sadr's rebellion has quieted down. Fallujah has been in some measure pacified and turned over to Iraqi troops. Considerable power was transferred to Iraqi authorities. And most importantly, Americans have stopped dying in large numbers.

Additionally, the Abu Ghraib scandal was, at long last, pushed off the front pages of major newspapers, including the *New York Times*. The 9/11 Commission issued its report and spared President Bush from the vitriolic partisan criticism most observers had come to expect. One of Kerry's most trusted foreign policy advisors, Clinton National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, was caught stuffing highly classified documents into his drawers and stealing them from the National Archives. And one of President Bush's harshest and highest profile critics, former ambassador Joseph Wilson, who also doubles as a foreign policy advisor to Kerry, was called and, to a certain extent, proven to be, a "big fat liar," both by the Senate Intelligence Committee and by a British intelligence commission lead by retired civil service chief Lord Butler.

Given all of this, it is no surprise that President Bush's poll numbers have been slowly and steadily improving. In fact, one poll released over the weekend by CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup showed that not only did Kerry not get much of a bounce from his convention, but he actually lost ground to President Bush, who now leads 50-47%. And while I tend to think that this poll is an anomaly, given the fact that it is generally countered by most other post-convention surveys, I do think that it fits the pattern of all major nonpartisan polls, which show that this is still a very close race. In April and May, the President had two extremely difficult months that almost certainly would have sealed the fate of a lesser candidate, or more accurately of a candidate running against anyone other than a strikingly weak candidate like John Kerry. Yet President Bush has hung around and remains in a virtual tie. This, I think, bodes well for him.

More importantly, between now and November, President Bush will have several other opportunities to “change the dynamics” of the race. For starters, he has his own convention still upcoming. By the end of this month, when the Republicans gather in New York, most voters will have long forgotten about last week’s Democratic conclave and will similarly have forgotten much of what John Kerry said last Thursday night, presuming, of course, that they remember any of it now, which is itself a dubious proposition. And so, as the final stretch of the campaign begins in earnest, Bush’s message will be fresh in the minds of voters, and Kerry’s will not be.

There is also reason to believe that the commemoration of 9/11 may be a “dynamics” altering event. Of course, the Democrats will, out of reflex, wax apoplectic about any public remembrance of the 9/11 victims, shrieking that any mention of that day by President Bush is “playing politics” with the tragedy, despite the fact they played politics with it themselves during their just-completed convention. But voters are likely only to see President Bush leading the nation through its pain and sorrow, much as he did that fateful autumn day nearly three years ago. And this can only serve to enhance him in their estimation, Michael Moore’s claims of the President’s 9/11 incompetence and befuddlement notwithstanding.

In addition, President Bush will almost certainly have an opportunity to change the course of the election, if need be by that point in time, during the presidential debates. Though Bush is not considered the best debater in the world, he will almost certainly look vigorous and comparatively lucid next to the ponderous and tediously rambling Kerry.

In short, President Bush appears to have ample opportunity to lift his poll numbers over the next three months. And you can bet that he will not sit idly by and allow this election to slip away from him the way his father did in 1992. Already the President’s team has begun a post-DNC blitz against Kerry, and if there is one thing we have, over the past three-plus years, learned about George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and those closest to them, it is that when faced with the choice of action or inaction, they always opt for action. That may not be the most “conservative” of mindsets, but it certainly has served them and, I would argue, the nation well over the last three-and-a-half years.

And this brings us to last week’s Democratic National Convention and the final and perhaps most important reason why I believe George Bush is still in control of his own destiny.

While the President and his team have proven their willingness to move aggressively, and will certainly continue to move thusly during this campaign season, the Democrats have instead opted for a strategy of caution. At last week’s convention, they scrupulously avoided any discussion of substantive social issues; addressed neither the broader war on terror nor the war in Iraq; made only superficial and passing references to economic issues; and flat out refused to allow the rage that most participants feel for President Bush and Vice President Cheney to be vented.

For better or worse, the Democrats settled on a strategy, both for the convention and for the campaign, that rests on one handful of interrelated suppositions, namely that most Americans simply don’t like George Bush, don’t like the job that he’s done, and will, if given the opportunity, vote for someone – *anyone* – else. Kerry, you may recall, began his speech with the painfully cheesy line, “My name is John Kerry, and I’m reporting for duty.” But for all that he said in the speech and, for that matter, for all that was said at the convention in general, Kerry

might just as easily have begun “Hi, I’m not George Bush,” and then called it a night. This is, in my opinion, a major mistake.

In 1996, Republican Vice Presidential nominee Jack Kemp declared that the “character issue” was off the table, stating, for all intents and purposes, that he and his running mate, Bob Dole, were above such personal attacks on their opponents. Though it is unlikely that Dole and Kemp would have won anyway, by removing their most potent weapon from their arsenal, the Republicans assured their defeat. Dole and Kemp did not eliminate talk of Bill Clinton’s ethical lapses from the campaign; they merely conceded their ability to control the debate on the issue.

Kerry and Edwards have just done the same thing. The Democrats undoubtedly feel that their ability to control the anti-Bush rancor at their convention was a powerful demonstration of unity and discipline, and they may well be right. But that doesn’t mean that they’ve done the Kerry-Edwards ticket any favors.

With both the Vice Presidential and Presidential nominees declaring themselves above “going negative” against Bush, the Democrats have fallen into the same trap as did the Republicans in 1996. The “Bush bashing” will, of course, not stop. But Kerry and Edwards have, like, Dole and Kemp, given up their ability to control it. They could have taken advantage of the relative and likely temporary sanity of folks like Al Gore and Howard Dean to make their own case against their opponents. Indeed, that is the traditional role of the Vice Presidential nominee, and not, I should add, a role from which Dick Cheney will shy. Instead, the campaign confined its attacks on Bush to a handful of cheap shots that will be little understood and even less appreciated outside the party’s base.

This is a strategy born of a mixture of unawareness and arrogance, and it is unlikely, in my opinion, to be successful. Kerry and Edwards don’t feel that they have to make the case against Bush because, as I noted above, they believe people already dislike him enough to look for an alternative. And they believe people dislike Bush because everyone they know does, in fact, dislike him. The Democrats seem willing to accept as an article of faith that George Bush is not likable, because they can’t think of anyone who actually likes him, except for a handful of yokels, racists, and misogynists who constitute the far right wing of the Republican Party. This attitude is, as *National Review’s* Jay Nordlinger noted last week, born of the same arrogance that produced the famous (infamous?) Pauline Kael quote in 1972: “I can’t believe Nixon beat McGovern. I don’t know anyone who voted for him.”

This is, by the way, the same combination of arrogance and unawareness that led unnamed Congressional Democrats and their partners in crime at the Democrat-friendly *New York Times* to reignite the rumors of Dick Cheney being replaced on the ticket in a front page story that appeared in the paper just a couple of weeks ago. It makes sense to liberals that Cheney would be replaced, since they can’t possibly imagine *anyone* liking him or thinking of him as anything but a political liability. To the Democrats, it doesn’t matter that most Republicans do, in fact, like Cheney, and that on the campaign trail he radiates confidence and competence. They dislike him and they think that should be enough.

And so it is with George W. Bush. Kerry and Edwards don’t like Bush and they think that should be enough. They are, of course, aided in this delusion by prominent strategists and

political operatives within their party who are whispering in their ear about how great things are and how wonderfully things are going to work out. With the guys at Democracy Corps running around the convention last week talking about a White House-Senate-House sweep in the making and declaring that the presidential contest is “all over but the voting,” it’s no wonder that the candidates believe they’ve found the winning message.

Of course, if you ask me, the candidates might be given a moment’s pause by the fact that this same bunch of strategists and operatives were also running around guaranteeing victory at about the same point in the campaigns in 2000 and again in 2002. But then no one asked me. But if they did, I’d tell them I’m still betting on Bush.

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