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A Landslide in the Making

THEY SAID IT

For nearly four years now, we've been told this is a 50-50 nation, that red and blue America are so evenly divided that even a small misstep could swing this presidential election either way. The media may have their own reasons for sticking to the story line-- drama is good for ratings, after all--but there's mounting evidence that the electorate is not nearly as evenly divided as it was in 2000; that come Nov. 2, newscasters are going to be putting a lot more red than blue on their electoral maps. I will make a prediction here: Mr. Kerry will be lucky to top the 45.7% of the popular vote Michael Dukakis got in 1988.

--Columnist Brendan Miniter, in the Sept. 7 edition of his Opinionjournal column "On the Western Front."

A LANDSLIDE IN THE MAKING

Three weeks ago, on a conference call Mark and I did for clients and prospective clients, I went out on a limb just a bit and predicted that if John Kerry's September and October proved to be as bad as was his August, then this election would be decided in a landslide, reminiscent at least of Bush-Dukakis, if not Reagan-Mondale or Nixon-McGovern.

Regular readers know that Mark and I have, throughout this campaign, rejected the conventional wisdom that the election would, like that in 2000, be extraordinarily close. But prior to that fateful Thursday, the phrase "landslide" had never crossed my lips. The closest I had come to predicting a blowout was in the March 15th edition of this newsletter, when I suggested that the newly ordained Democratic nominee would have his work cut out for him. I put it thusly:

In addition to carrying the burdens of his party, John Kerry is carrying his own tremendous personal burdens. While I still don't foresee a total rout along the lines of Nixon-McGovern or Gipper-Mondale, when all is said and done, I think most people will look back and wonder how they ever thought this thing would be close. Kerry is a dud, and I suspect that the "people" (voters, media types, analysts, etc.) will figure this out, and my guess is sooner rather than later.

I realize, of course, that September is only half over, but it is already shaping up to be another pretty awful month for the Kerry campaign, not as bad as August, perhaps, but bad enough that I am more and more confident in declaring that this thing could get ugly for him.

The month started out bad enough, with Kerry's fellow Democrat Zell Miller giving the most memorable convention speech in at least a generation and with the President himself following that up the next night with a very good address of his own. Add to that the significant bounce the convention gave the President, the very public display of consternation with the Kerry campaign by many prominent Democrats, the equally public subsequent shakeup of the Kerry campaign team, and, last week, the emergence of the scandal that will likely be remembered as "Rather-Gate" (a scandal that while probably not connected to the Kerry campaign, will almost certainly benefit the President), and things look pretty bleak for the challenger.

Now, I know that despite the gains President Bush has made over the past six weeks, conventional wisdom still insists that this election will be close. Indeed, Friday evening, *National Review* editor Rich Lowry recounted a conversation he'd just had with a Bush strategist who told him, "There was no reason for the near-panic among Republicans eight weeks ago or so, and there is no reason for the euphoria now. No one is going to build a substantial lead in this race. It's going to be very close until the end."

But I don't buy it. I hesitate to say this, mainly because I hate to look like the delusional Democratic boobs who declared the race over after Kerry's convention in Boston. But in the absence of a pretty dramatic turnaround on the part of Kerry campaign, I am more and more convinced not just that President Bush will win, but that his victory will be rather decisive. Yes, yes, I know that there's a long way to go until election day, that much can and will happen between now and then, that Bush still has the capacity to screw this up, and all the rest. But I also know that the Kerry campaign looks weaker and weaker by the moment, not simply because Bush has had a few good weeks, but because Kerry, as a candidate, is deeply and fundamentally flawed, as is the party he represents.

The primary problem with the Kerry campaign is, of course, the candidate himself. Since March, Mark and I have written probably a dozen times between us that

the real threat to Kerry's ambitions is the likelihood that the more voters see of the candidate the less they will like him. Throughout late spring and early summer, Democratic operatives suggested that Kerry, a Senator for 20-plus years, but still an unknown commodity to most Americans, simply had to "introduce" himself to the public, and allow voters to "get to know him." It didn't quite work out that way.

In late July, after adding the mildly charismatic John Edwards to the ticket, Kerry rolled into Boston, ahead in the polls and increasingly confident. And though most people have forgotten this now, given the absolutely dreadful month that followed, the Democrats actually put on a pretty good convention, one that hit on many of the right themes and that highlighted many talented and convincing politicians plugging for Kerry (e.g. Bill Clinton, Barack Obama). But when the convention was over, Kerry had no bounce. None. Zip. Zero. Zilch.

The pollsters and pundits all declared that the reason Kerry had no bounce was that voters this year are abnormally sure of the candidate for whom they will pull the lever and there are consequently fewer "undecideds" who may be swayed by the infomercials that are modern political conventions. This theory, they assured us, would be borne out after the Republican Convention, when Bush too would receive very little bounce. Needless to say, things didn't play out quite as predicted.

As it turns out, the reason the Democratic convention produced no bounce is that voters simply weren't all that impressed with the guy the Democrats trotted out to the podium on closing night. Yes, he's a war hero who saved the life of a Green Beret; and yes, he's the kind of guy who'd give mouth-to-mouth to his daughters' dying hamster. But he's also a pompous, ponderous blowhard, a serial groom to multi-millionaire heiresses, a guy who takes a break from it all by flying up to the missus' place in Idaho to do a little skiing.

In the first piece that Mark and I wrote on then-frontrunner John Kerry back in mid-February, we put this thought this way.

One thing is certain. In nine months, Americans will get to know John Kerry pretty well. They will hear him discuss such issues as the economy, jobs, Iraq, national defense, terrorism, the environment, gun ownership, fiscal deficits, health care, Social Security, and the decency and competence of their current president. And at some point in this process, they will slowly begin to form opinions about him on less quantifiable issues, such as character, integrity, personality, empathy, appearance, demeanor, and yes, his vision for America.

It is at this point that John Kerry's ratings will begin to slide. And after the election, all the talking heads and "political analysts" are going to offer the same explanation for why he lost. But you, gentle reader, will not have to wait, because I am going to tell you now. He will have lost because when people came to know him they found that they didn't particularly like him.

They are going to discover why no one paid any attention to him until the guy they really liked, Howard Dean, turned out to be a wacko; why Al Gore rejected him as a running mate four years earlier; and why Morgan Fairchild and Michelle Phillips, two celebrities he once dated, gave money to other candidates in the 2004 primaries. They are going to learn that the centerpiece of his campaign is his service in Vietnam because he hasn't done anything notable in the 30 years since. They are going to find out that he is arrogant, tight fisted, self-centered, and not a lot of fun. They are going to find out that he's not the kind of guy they would like to have join them each night, via the wonders of television, when they are eating dinner and watching the news. It's that simple.

Immediately after Kerry's convention speech, journalist and blogger Andrew Sullivan, who leans libertarian but who has declared his disgust with Bush and his desire to see a new president, echoed these comments, calling the Senator, "an arrogant jerk" and "a deeply unlikable guy: arrogant, dull, pompous, [ill] mannered, self-righteous." *New York Daily News's* Zev Chafets added, "[H]e [Kerry] is a bad candidate in a terrible situation. He represents the wing of the Democratic Party that is imbued with a sense of its own moral, intellectual, cultural and social superiority. In short, he is the standard bearer for the unbearable."

Now, I'm no highly paid campaign strategist, but it seems to me that if the people you would expect to say nice things about your candidate are instead calling him "unlikable," "arrogant," and "unbearable," you not only have a real problem, but a problem that is largely unfixable.

That is not to say, however, that the problem cannot be altered. Unfortunately for Kerry, while personality issues are seldom fixable, they can be compounded. And that is precisely what has happened to John Kerry in the course of this campaign. Though the Senator, his wife, his kids, his running mate, his party chairman, and nearly every Democrat capable of doing so have spent inordinate time over the past few months calling Kerry "a fighter," his actions suggest a different label would be more appropriate.

Given his responses to both the challenges of the campaign and the questions about his fitness for office raised by President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and others such as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, Kerry actually appears to be more of "whiner" than a fighter. And this has made his barely tolerable personality even less attractive to voters, who, polls show, are looking for a decisive leader for troubled times.

Over the last six months or so, every time the Bush campaign has raised a concern about Kerry or suggested that the Senator would make a less effective President than George W. Bush, Kerry's campaign has responded by saying, essentially, "that's mean."

Every criticism is met with a comment about how the Republicans have “gone negative” or about how “mean-spirited” the GOP is. If I had a dollar for every time I’ve had to listen to Kerry declare that “no one’s going to question my patriotism” or, as he said during his truly bizarre post-RNC Midnight Madness rally, “I will not have my commitment to defend this country questioned by those who refused to serve when they had a chance,” I’d almost be able to pay Melcher’s bar tab at the Moose Lodge.

The contrast between President Bush’s behavior and Kerry’s over the last few weeks is, I think, instructive. When the Swift Boat Veterans started their campaign, Kerry and his surrogates reacted rather pathetically. I know that the Democratic lore already has it that Kerry did not respond to the Swifties at all, but that is simply not true. He did not respond decisively, but he did respond. Immediately after the ads began to air, the Senator and his surrogates started to whine that the Swifties had been on different boats, were partisan hacks, weren’t telling the truth, and above all else, shouldn’t question the actions of a hero anyway. The campaign even went so far as to threaten legal action against both the television stations that aired the Swifties’ ads and the book stores that carried their book.

Yet last week, when CBS News and Kerry’s hometown paper, the *New York Times*-owned *Boston Globe*, ran new stories with new allegations about Bush’s National Guard service based on new documents, the White House did no such whining. In fact, the White House passed out copies of the now-known-to-be-bogus documents to interested pool reporters.

Moreover, for the entirety of his Presidency, Bush has listened to Democrats say the most vile, hateful things about him, but has never felt the infantile need to complain that his opponents were being “mean” to him.

A Democratic Congresswoman charged that the President knew about 9/11, but kept quiet so that he could make some money for his oil-industry buddies. This suggestion was later seconded by the then-front

runner for the Democratic Presidential nomination (and current prospective psychiatric patient) Howard Dean. The Chairman of the Democratic National Committee told the media that he thought the ridiculous (and since definitively disproven) claim that Bush and Cheney took on the Taliban in Afghanistan in order to help oil-industry pals secure rights to a natural gas pipeline through that country was “interesting” and deserving of further investigation. Half-a-dozen prominent Democrats, including the aforementioned Chairman of the party, have accused the President of being “AWOL” during his National Guard service. A Democrat-affiliated 527 (among others) has compared Bush to Adolf Hitler. *Etc. Etc. Ad infinitum.* But despite all of this, neither the President, nor his Vice President, nor even his wife (who has been asked about such things) has ever felt the need to complain about how his opponents are being “outrageous and shameful” or “un-American,” as Kerry and John Edwards, respectively, whined last week.

The bellyaching from the Kerry camp has become so routine and so annoying, that even entrenched liberals are noticing and growing weary of the act. In her column yesterday, the always wrong, but occasionally perceptive liberal scold Maureen Dowd grumbled that Kerry’s constant whining and moping are making him look like a sissy and quoted other Democrats who feel the same way. Specifically, she wrote:

“Howard Dean had the base all warmed up and now Kerry’s turned into a girlie-man,” said a Democratic insider, comparing it with the scene in “The Godfather” when the singer Johnny Fontane shows up at the wedding of Don Corleone’s daughter and whines that a studio chief is being mean to him. The godfather slaps the singer and barks, “Act like a man!”

The problem for Democrats is that even if Kerry does indeed begin to “act like a man,” it is, in my opinion, unlikely that he will be able to crawl out of the hole he has dug for himself. For as fundamentally flawed as their candidate may be, another big reason why I

expect the Democrats to lose handily this November is their own deficiencies, independent of those of their candidate, which will likely contribute heavily to the President's margin of victory.

For starters, there has been a great deal of talk over the last few weeks about how Kerry has replaced this strategist with that one, has substituted this spokesman for the other, and has altered the course of his campaign based on the counsel of his new advisors. And while many of the advisors attached to the Kerry campaign are well known both inside the Beltway and beyond, and many are very talented political operatives, none appears to have figured out the formula for political success in the post-9/11 world. And equally important, none appears terribly loyal to Kerry personally.

Right now, most of the anger within Democratic circles is focused on strategist and speechwriter Bob Shrum, who has been Kerry's chief political advisor throughout the general election campaign and who has also advised seven previous **unsuccessful** presidential candidates, including, most recently Al Gore. And while the anxious Democrats are right to question Shrum's painfully obsolete "class warfare" strategy, the potential replacement strategists and press spinners hardly strike fear into the heart of the Bush campaign.

There is little doubt that new Kerry press spokesman Joe Lockhart is battle-tested, having worked for several presidential campaigns, dating to Carter-Mondale in 1980 and, most recently, having served as the final White House spokesman for Bill Clinton. There is, however, no guarantee that he will be terribly successful in his new role. As Clinton's mouthpiece, he was always angry, defensive, and more than a little off-putting, none of which are images a floundering presidential campaign would want to project.

And while he may perform adequately in his new role, there can be little doubt that Lockhart was second choice for the slot, getting the job only after his former boss and predecessor as Clinton White House spokesman, Mike McCurry, turned it down. McCurry

was a masterful spokesman for Clinton at a time when Bill needed mastery the most, circa 1998, and would likely have been masterful working for Kerry as well.

If by some strange confluence of circumstances Mark ever gets The Political Forum and its employees (me) into such serious trouble that I need a spokesman to deflect, distract, and enchant on my behalf, McCurry will be the first person I call. In the Clinton White House, Lockhart was a poor replacement for the multitalented McCurry, and I suspect the same will be true on the campaign trail as well.

As for the other new Kerry additions – the rest of the Clinton crew: Paul Begala, James Carville, and Stanley Greenberg – there is no question that they are all talented political operatives who had considerable success in shepherding Bill Clinton into the Oval Office twelve years ago. But there is some question (considerable question, in fact) whether their standard shtick will play in a national security-conscious post-9/11 world. Last Friday, another former Clinton strategist, Dick Morris, suggested that the Clinton additions will help Kerry, but not enough to lift him out of his doldrums or anywhere near victory. Reminding voters of the unique political atmosphere that contributed significantly to Clinton's victory over the elder Bush in 1992, Morris wrote:

The addition of James Carville and Paul Begala to the team just reinforces the tendency to tack to the left, embracing an economic populism that resonates with 40 percent of the voters but leaves the rest cold.

After all, when Clinton needed to win 43 percent of the vote to get elected in 1992 against Bush, as Ross Perot split the Republican vote, he relied on Carville and Begala. But when he needed to win half the voters in the 1996 campaign, as Perot's appeal diminished, they were nowhere to be seen.

Carville and Begala will likely focus on “the economy, stupid,” which is a needed correction for Kerry — whose current strategy of trying to beat Bush on terrorism brings to mind Winston Churchill’s characterization of fighting a land war in Asia against Japan in World War II: “Going into the water to fight the shark.”

But in its focus on the economy, the Kerry team is likely to lose sight of one basic problem: In running against a bad economy, it is helpful if the economy is bad. With an unemployment rate approaching 5 percent, they’ll have a hard time making the case.

It is worth noting, I think, that Morris was too kind to say so, but there is reason to believe that Greenberg and Carville in particular are two operatives who may well have outlived their usefulness. Though they helped Clinton in ’92, neither has had any tremendous success of late. Indeed, these two, the co-founders of and brains behind Democracy Corps, were largely responsible for the strategy that lead Democrats to the electoral debacle that was the 2002 midterm, in which President Bush and his party bucked two longstanding and virtually immutable historical trends, picking up seats at the midterm and when the economy was very soft and shaky. It is, I believe, a sign of the Democrats’ desperation that they would return to Carville and Greenberg now, only two years after writing them off totally for their spectacular ineptitude.

One more point that Morris made that I believe is relevant, is that this crew has been “sent in” to save the day by Bill Clinton and can therefore be presumed to be loyal to Clinton, not Kerry. Specifically, he noted:

Both men are primarily loyal to the Clintons — Bill and Hillary. Clearly, the former president would like the former first lady to be president in 2008. And a Kerry victory would stand in the way. An axiom of politics is that generally you want your

campaign advisers to hope that you win — and Carville and Begala may not pass that standard.

This is important once again for the contrast it presents to the Republican campaign. Despite the intermittent reports of dissent in the ranks of the GOP, the party’s big shot strategists and operatives remain united in their desire to see Bush re-elected. Several weeks ago, for example, the incomparable Peggy Noonan took a leave of absence from her job with the *Wall Street Journal* to go to work for her party, believing that she had talents that might benefit candidates up and down the ticket.

And though she insisted that she was not going to involve herself in the Presidential campaign specifically, one would be hard pressed to make the case that Noonan had nothing to do with President Bush’s superb acceptance speech at the Republican convention two weeks ago. As many analysts have noted since, the powerful imagery and soaring rhetoric in that speech were “pure Peggy Noonan.”

Additionally, President Bush has been rejoined by his one-time advisor and longtime confidant, Karen Hughes. Karl Rove is undoubtedly still captain of the proverbial ship, but his manifold strengths have been complemented by the addition of other talented operatives, who, unlike their Democratic counterparts, are certain about the focus of their loyalty and the ultimate goal.

One final point about the Democratic strategists: they, like everyone else in their party, save Bill Clinton, are still apparently confused as to what this election is about and what concerns the voters. While Clinton has, according to press accounts, repeatedly told John Kerry to get over Vietnam, to get over the challenges to his military record, and to focus on a domestic agenda that might yet prove effective, neither Kerry nor his advisors appear able to “move on.”

Last week, when CBS and *The Boston Globe* broke the now-discredited memo stories, Kerry and his campaign team were practically giddy. Former Clinton

hand Sid Blumenthal declared happily that it is now “Bush’s turn to squirm,” and the campaign prepared to see “payback” dealt. As it turned out, of course, the fact that the memos are completely bogus dampened the celebration a bit. But even if they hadn’t, I suspect that the measure of revenge Kerry would have extracted would have been minimal.

First, it really doesn’t matter what the President did or didn’t do 30 years ago, since even the most heinous charges the Kerry campaign could dream up would be perfectly consistent with the Bush narrative. He was a drunk; he had problems; and he was a screw-up. Then he found Laura. Then he found God. And the rest is history.

More important, though, most voters just don’t care about what happened in the late 1960s and early 70s. Kerry and his Baby Boomer cohorts may still be under the misimpression that the Vietnam era was the singularly most important era in human history, but most voters have other ideas. They think that the next four years matter much more than something that happened three-plus decades ago.

But not only does the Kerry team not get this, but it appears it never will. Matt Drudge reported late last night that the Democratic National Committee will launch a new initiative this week, code-named “Operation Fortunate Son,” which will attempt yet again to raise questions about President Bush’s National Guard service.

This has to be about the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. With less than two months to go until election day, the Democrats are still chasing their tails, trying to “get” Bush for things he did and said while I was still in diapers and while Mark still had hair. I don’t know whether this is Kerry’s idea, or if he’s been advised to pursue this course by one of the aforementioned gurus. In either case, I expect the campaign will find their efforts to turn the election on Bush’ National Guard status will prove a total flop. But that, I guess is what we’ve come to expect from this campaign.

After all, back in January, in my annual prediction piece, I suggested that John Kerry would “be described, without exaggeration, as the biggest presidential flop in recent memory.” Of course, at that time, I expected him to lose in the primaries, but the prediction, I think, still holds for the general election.

In January, I concluded my thoughts on Kerry by noting that “it would be difficult to find a modern candidate from whom more was expected, but who delivered less.” And while that might not be technically true anymore, since finishing worse than either Mondale or McGovern would require a candidate of unique ineptitude, I still think Kerry has a chance to be a pretty spectacular presidential loser. If his campaign continues along the path it’s been traveling for nearly two months now, it seems to me that anything is possible, anything, that is, except a win or even a respectable loss.

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