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THEY SAID IT

Herb: Time's gettin' pretty short.

Kane: It sure is.

Herb: When are the other boys gonna get here? We gotta make plans.

Kane: The other boys? There aren't any other boys, Herb. It's just you and me.

Herb: (nervously smiles and chuckles) You're jokin'.

Kane: No, I couldn't get anybody.

Herb: I don't believe it. This town ain't that low.

Kane: I couldn't get anybody.

Herb: Then it's just you and me.

Kane: I guess so.

Herb: You and me against Miller and all the rest of them?

Kane: That's right. Do you want out, Herb?

Herb: Well, it isn't that I want out, no. You see. Look, I'll tell ya the truth. I didn't figure on anything like this, Will.

Kane: Neither did I.

Herb: I volunteered. You know I did. You didn't have to come to me. I was ready. Sure, I'm ready now - but this is different, Will. This ain't like what you said it was gonna be. This is just plain committing suicide and for what? Why me? I'm no lawman. I just live here. I got nothin' personal against nobody. I got no stake in this.

Kane: I guess not.

Herb: There's a limit how much you can ask a man. I got a wife and kids. What about my kids?

Kane: Go on home to your kids, Herb.

--Scene from the 1952 movie, "High Noon," starring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly.

A DEBATABLE OUTCOME

Had enough post-debate commentary? Enough descriptions of President Bush as stammering, annoyed, and tired? Enough of the gushing observations concerning how well John Kerry did and how he "looked and sounded presidential?" Enough claims that Kerry "far exceeded expectations," while Bush "terribly underperformed?" Well, me too.

But that's not going to stop me from piling on with a few thoughts of my own about last Thursday's confrontation. You see, from what I've seen and read over the past few days, no one, to the best of my knowledge, has noted that this debate was important not just in the day-to-combat of the last month of the Presidential election campaign, but in broader terms as well. Indeed, in my opinion, the immediate importance of the debate has likely been overstated, but the clues it provided about the general state of American politics are potentially invaluable.

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Before I get into that, though, I will offer some specific thoughts about the actual head-to-head match-up that you may or may not have heard elsewhere, but which I have to get off my chest.

For starters, anyone who is saying or writing that Kerry exceeded expectations and that Bush fell flat (which is almost everyone) is lying, spinning, or simply following the proverbial herd. Kerry, the alleged underdog in the debate, has, for his entire adult life, made his living and reputation as a public speaker. He spent the last 20 years in the Senate, the “world’s greatest deliberative body,” and before that was Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts, a county prosecutor, and a well-known anti-war activist, who toured the nation leading and speaking at anti-war demonstrations. In fact, according to columnist Richard Reeves, the “revered and distinguished Yale debate coach, Rollin Osterwies” called Kerry the “second-best” debater he ever coached, behind only William F. Buckley. In short, Kerry knows how to handle himself behind a podium.

Bush, in contrast, is Bush. He is a likeable guy who, when given a text from which to read, can give a stirring and heartfelt performance. He is affable, folksy, and often funny. But he is also a dreadful extemporaneous speaker. Always has been. I know that he was hyped by the Kerry crew as a “great debater” who had never lost a major political debate, but that was pure spin, part of the expectations game that all campaigns play prior to an event such as this. I am not knocking the President, but anyone who honestly expected that he would mop the floor with Kerry must never have seen him speak off-the-cuff. George W. Bush is a man of many gifts, but extemporaneous oration is not one of them.

Second, the polls showing that Kerry not only won the debate but, in so doing, erased President Bush’s lead in the ballot test should be viewed with a touch of skepticism. The most notable of these polls, published over the weekend by *Newsweek*, claimed that the Bush lead (as high as 11 points at one time during September) has completely dissipated and

that the President now actually trails Kerry by three points, two, if Nader is added. Of course, this sounds like great news for the Kerry team. But a look at the details hidden in the poll’s methodology suggests that Teresa should not start measuring the Oval Office for new drapes just yet.

The folks at the Political Vice Squad blog note, among other things, that this poll sampled far more Democrats and far fewer Republicans than previous *Newsweek* offerings. Moreover, the first night of the three-night survey covered only states in the two western-most time zones, which, not so coincidentally include liberal bastions like California, Oregon, and Washington. The Political Vice Squad put it thusly:

Back on September 11th (good time for a political poll, huh?), NewsWeak belched out a set of data that was based on the following partisan breakdown:

R = 39 percent
D = 30 percent
I = 27 percent
Not stated = 4 percent . . .

Here’s the partisan breakdown for today’s “poll” by NewsWeak:

R = 34 percent
D = 36 percent
I = 27 percent
Not stated = 3 percent

In other words, they decreased Republican sampling by 5 percentage points and increased Democratic sampling by 6 full percentage points. Furthermore, this “poll” strictly was limited to the “Pacific and Mountain time zones.” In other words, registered voters from the following states completely were excluded: Texas, Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Louisiana, Arkansas, Kentucky, Indiana, and the entire old south.

As for the other post-debate polls, most experts believe that they will show some tightening. Gallup, like *Newsweek*, shows the race essentially tied again. Whether this tightening is due to the debate or simply part of the natural campaign cycle in which Democrats often pick up ground in October, no one can say for certain. I suspect that any “bounce” the debate gave Kerry will be short-lived, for while Kerry certainly won the style component of the contest, Bush likely won on substance, or at least will win on the substance of this first debate before the campaign is over.

I say this because even if voters were not overly impressed with Bush’s performance Thursday night, he and his campaign advisors came away from the debate with considerable material to use against Kerry in both ads and stump speeches. Indeed, already Bush is, both on the campaign trail and in new spots, hitting Kerry hard for his “global test” comment.

And this brings us to what I believe is the point of greatest significance relative to the first head-to-head meeting between Bush and Kerry. I am speaking of the contest between style and substance.

Democrats seem to believe that this campaign is, like almost every campaign they can recall, about style. In their estimation, September 11th did not fundamentally change the political discourse in this nation, or if it did, that conditions have returned to normal since that fateful day. Therefore, they believe today, as they believed in 2000 and 1996 and 1992, etc., that the candidate who makes the best presentation, who looks the most presidential, and who articulates his agenda most eloquently will win.

Republicans, in contrast, cling to the idea that “everything changed” on 9/11, that the nation was awakened on that day to the fact that it is fighting a war that it did not seek and that it therefore needs wartime leadership. They believe that this campaign is, as wartime campaigns before it, about substance. Regardless of which candidate looks better on the stump or which one can string together the

most eloquent compound-complex sentence, the Republicans believe that the American electorate is now on a wartime footing and that the guy who wins this election will be the one who is the most resolute and offers the toughest, most level-headed approach to defeating the enemy.

Given all of this, after the debate, Democrats and their leaders were, as the Associated Press noted on Friday, “gleeful” and “almost giddy,” much as they were at the conclusion of their convention in Boston. As Mark Steyn noted yesterday, both on Thursday and in July, Kerry was “tactically artful,” and this left his supporters swooning, believing that their guy looked better and therefore would be perceived as the better candidate.

Republican partisans, on the other hand, were generally disappointed and more than a little dispirited after the debate. Just as they did after Bush’s speech in New York last month, Bill Kristol and Rich Lowry, the respective editors of the two most influential conservative periodicals in the country (*The Weekly Standard* and *National Review*), criticized Bush for missing or glossing over some of the most important aspects of the current global conflict. Both in New York and in Miami, many Republican supporters believed that Bush was ultimately unconvincing in large part because he took too much of the substance out of his presentation.

Those of us who have been predicting a Bush victory have done so in large part because we agree with the Republicans on this issue. Given the peculiarities of the current political environment, we tend to believe that substance trumps style. Mark and I, for our parts, have long argued that George Bush, while stylistically imperfect and therefore theoretically vulnerable, would nevertheless win handily because the current crop of Democrats is still too addled by its Vietnam neuroses to be able provide effective wartime leadership.

And we are hardly alone in our expectation that the war in Iraq and President Bush’s leadership of that war will, in the end, be the deciding factors in this election. The comparison between the Bush-Kerry contest and

the Lincoln-McClellan contest in 1864, for example, has become a staple of conservative-leaning forecasts. Last week, *after the debate*, *National Review Online* ran an article by classics professor Victor Davis Hanson that typifies this school of thought. His conclusion is particularly telling. To wit:

So Kerry flips and flops like a fish out of water, suggesting that his heart is with Howard Dean while his mind concurs with George Bush — and thus his schizophrenia is on the verge of leading his party to a landslide defeat in the electoral college, *and the loss of all branches of government with it*. Americans simply have never voted for leaders who insult their allies on the battlefield, claim that their soldiers are losing, and shrug that the war is about lost. And they surely won't this time either.

For much of this campaign, our expectations have generally been confirmed by public opinion polls, which have shown that the war on terror and the war in Iraq are two issues on which President Bush consistently beats Senator Kerry and that Bush does better in the head-to-head match-up when those issues are front-and-center in the voters' minds. And while we believe that this trend will hold and that President Bush will be able to overcome his stylistically challenged debating technique to win on the substance of his war leadership, we can't say that for certain.

Indeed, throughout the year, there has been one pollster/prognosticator who has consistently declared that this election is John Kerry's to lose and that if he follows the patterns of previous successful challengers he will not do so. It would, under normal circumstances, be easy to dismiss one naysayer. But in this case, that naysayer has a history of being right and of being the only one who is.

I am referring here to John Zogby, who over the past few presidential election cycles has produced the most accurate final vote total predictions and who was, in 2000, the only pollster to detect the late surge by Al Gore and consequently to predict a Gore victory in the popular vote.

All year long, Zogby has argued that this election is like any other and that John Kerry must simply avoid any serious mistakes and he will win the presidency. Over the last month, while others have shown a significant lead for President Bush, Zogby's polls have shown the race to be remarkably close (roughly 3 points). And even before the debate, Zogby reiterated his belief that Kerry would be the eventual victor. Last Thursday, he wrote:

The best that can be said is that the President's numbers are still better than Mr. Kerry's. But my polling reveals another important fact — Mr. Kerry has more room for growth than the President. He has to first consolidate his base with an anti-war message that his base wants. He need not worry about accusations of flip-flopping on this issue because that is what the other side says about him and they are never going to vote for him under any circumstances. This alone will bring him to parity with the President in the polls.

From there we see a startling statistic: only 16% to 20% of undecided voters feel that the President deserves to be re-elected. Forty-percent of this relatively small group feel that it is time for someone new. They seem to have their minds made up about the President and have been given no reason to vote for Mr. Kerry. What is most important to this group? They agree with Mr. Bush on values, leadership, the war on terror, and likeability. They prefer Mr. Kerry on the economy, health care, the war, and education.

It should come as no surprise that Zogby also thinks the debates are paramount in this campaign. In last week's article, he noted that debates have historically been decisive in close contests, citing the examples of Kennedy-Nixon and Reagan-Carter. Furthermore, he argued that the debates would be "especially momentous" and would "take on a special significance this year." This belief in the preeminence of the

debates makes perfect sense from the perspective of Zogby, who has consistently maintained that this election is not too terribly unlike previous ones. It also confirms that Zogby's expectations are that this year's election will hinge primarily on style over substance.

Now, to be perfectly honest, if I were running a campaign, I would feel much more comfortable about the outcome if Zogby were picking my guy to win. For whatever reason, his models have proven uncannily and singularly accurate. That said, I can't help but think that 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror changed things just enough that his models will not prove as accurate this time around.

The Democrats are betting that I am wrong, that Zogby is right, and that this election will be no different than any other. I think they've gambled foolishly. I think this election will be different, and significantly so. I think the President's wartime leadership will, in the end, prove more powerful a draw than John Kerry's over-elaborate and pretentious oratory. In other words, four weeks from now, I think we will be able to look back on last Thursday's debate and conclude that while Kerry won, it didn't really make any difference at all. So the bottom line from us, in the post-first-debate world, is Bush by a comfortable margin – still.

HIGH NOON IN IRAQ

Largely because John Kerry was determined from the start to make his military service an issue in the presidential race, the Vietnam War has resurfaced as a political football of sorts, after several decades of fading importance.

In addition to the attention focused on the actions of Kerry and President Bush during the Vietnam War years, a common example of the renewal of Vietnam as a topic of political discussion is the routine comparison by pundits and politicians alike of that conflict with the war in Iraq. These comparisons are sometimes interesting and often politically useful, but it is important to understand when considering

this issue that there is a fundamental and extremely important difference between the two wars that makes the Vietnam experience worthless as an indicator of where the war in Iraq is headed and how it will be fought.

This difference has to do with the fact that the decision to pull out of Vietnam, and thus allow the North to take over the South, was of minimal immediate strategic importance to the United States. It was certainly a blow to American pride. And even more importantly, it exposed a dirty little secret that has become a powerful war mantra among America's enemies ever since, namely that despite its overwhelming military power, the United States is not invincible; that a much smaller and significantly weaker adversary can defeat it via a well-orchestrated effort to break the will of the American public to fight.

But the fact of the matter is that the loss of the war in Vietnam was not crucial to either the short or the long-term security of the United States, and this is most definitely not the case in Iraq. A reasonable argument can be made that the United States should not have invaded Iraq in the first place. But no serious person can argue that it could now abandon the war there, as it did in Vietnam, without causing immediate and severe damage to its strategic and economic security.

In fact, it is unthinkable that the United States could afford to allow Iraq to fall into the hands of the extremist Muslims who are attempting to depose the government there and to drive U.S. troops out of the country. Not only would a newly radicalized Iraq throw the entire Middle East into turmoil by threatening friendly governments all over the region and in neighboring areas as well, from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, it would most probably eventually lead to a war between Israel and its neighbors, which could involve nuclear weapons.

Thus, when considering the future of the war in Iraq, it is important to understand that the United States does not have the option of throwing in the towel

as it did in Vietnam, which, oddly enough, is one of the reasons that help is so hard to find. Why, for example, would Germany and France commit money and troops to the effort when they know that not only can the United States do it by itself, but that it will if it must.

As I have often said in these pages, I believe that the United States will eventually succeed in establishing a reasonably stable, reasonably decent (by Middle East standards, at least) government in Iraq, which is reasonably friendly toward the United States. If I am wrong about this, I believe that the alternative outcome would not be a pullout of U.S. troops and the formation of an enemy government, as was the case in Vietnam. Instead, I think it would involve a prolonged U.S. military occupation operating out of several well-fortified bases, engaged in the task of supporting a puppet government, protecting the nation's oil producing regions, and fighting a long, brutal, low-intensity urban war.

Indeed, in my opinion, the probability that the United States would abandon Iraq as it did South Vietnam is so remote that the danger of a Kerry presidency is not that he would lose the war there, as some critics maintain, but that he would spend a great deal of time and effort on various naïve and fanciful schemes to fight what he once described as a more "sensitive" war, and this would significantly extend the time-frame of trouble and raise the long-term cost of the effort, both in men and money.

These could include lengthy and fruitless "summits" with the enemy, which could delay the implementation of decisive action; hat-in-hand negotiations with European nations to garner military and financial help, which could result in the United States making damaging concessions on the warfront; various and sundry tactical experiments to continue the fight with fewer troops and for less money, which could increase casualties and result in military setbacks; and a steady flow of compromises over what would be an acceptable outcome, which would encourage the enemy to fight harder.

The fact that there is no alternative to staying the course in Iraq is not lost on either candidate, of course. John Kerry in particular chafes under this reality, as he tries to reconcile it with his need to appeal to the large anti-war element in his party. What no one seems to recognize, however, is that the limiting of America's options in the Middle East to achieving a military victory over Muslim extremists represents a sea change in the political debate over how long-term peace might be achieved in the region.

Prior to September 11, 2001 and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, it is probably safe to say that the most popular theory among American politicians in both parties concerning the origin of Arab irascibility was the existence of Israel and America's support for it.

Unable to offer the Arabs complete satisfaction on this front, proponents of this theory reasoned that the next best thing was for the United States to adopt a policy of putting constant pressure on Israel to make concessions to its enemies in the hope that this would somehow make its presence in the region less objectionable to them.

Most proponents of this strategy certainly understood that this approach had no chance of success. But it was attractive to them nevertheless because it gained the United States some favor among the Arab states by helping to advance their long term plans to destroy Israel. An additional benefit was that an aggressive proponent of this theory qualified for a chance to join the ranks of such well-known Nobel Peace Prize winners as the terrorist Yasir Arafat.

Today, however, it is rare to hear an American politician advance the idea that Israel is responsible for the on-going turmoil in the Middle East and that the only way to bring peace to the region is for the Jewish state voluntarily to weaken its ability to defend itself.

In fact, last Thursday night, the President of the United States and the Democratic Party's standard bearer in the upcoming presidential election spent

one-and-a-half hours on national television before an audience of over 50 million people debating U.S. foreign policy, and neither man promised to devote any time at all to brokering a peace agreement between Israel and its neighbors, despite the fact that such promises have played a central role in the foreign policy of every president since Jimmy Carter.

Certainly the images of Palestinians exuberantly celebrating in the streets after learning of the deaths of 3,000 innocent people in America during the attacks of September 11 had something to do with this waning of political support for the Arab case against Israel.

But this is only part of the story. I think a more important factor is that during the three years since the September 11 attacks, Americans of all ages and political persuasions have learned a great deal about the contemporary Islamic world and have come to the conclusion that the current problems between the United States and militant Islam have nothing to do with Israel, but are related instead to a sickness that exists within the worldwide community of Islam.

They have learned that this enemy is fanatical. That he can't be appeased. That peace talks won't work against such an enemy. That forcing Israel to grant concessions will only make things worse by weakening one of America's most powerful friends in the region. That the enemy is demanding a fight and that there's no safe home to run to as there was in Vietnam because this time the enemy will tag along behind and carry the fight into the homes and lives of ordinary American citizens.

While the details and certainty of these conclusions will vary from person to person, I believe the following paragraphs provide a pretty good summary of what more and more Americans are beginning to understand about the nature and origins of militant Islam. As such, I believe that this view is likely to provide the foundation for the formation of U.S. policy toward the Middle East in the years ahead, regardless of whether George Bush or John Kerry sits in the White House.

These paragraphs come from a speech given last April by the noted theoretical physicist Haim Harari, who is Chair of the Davidson Institute of Science Education and former President of the Weizmann Institute for Science.

Israel and any problems related to it, in spite of what you might read or hear in the world media, is not the central issue, and has never been the central issue in the upheaval in the region. Yes, there is a 100 year-old Israeli-Arab conflict, but it is not where the main show is.

The millions who died in the Iran-Iraq war had nothing to do with Israel.

The mass murder happening right now in Sudan, where the Arab Moslem regime is massacring its black Christian citizens, has nothing to do with Israel.

The frequent reports from Algeria about the murders of hundreds of civilians in one village or another by other Algerians have nothing to do with Israel.

Saddam Hussein did not invade Kuwait, endanger Saudi Arabia and butcher his own people because of Israel.

Egypt did not use poison gas against Yemen in the 60's because of Israel.

Assad the Father did not kill tens of thousands of his own citizens in one week in El Hamma in Syria because of Israel.

The Taliban control of Afghanistan and the civil war there had nothing to do with Israel.

The Libyan blowing up of the Pan-Am flight had nothing to do with Israel, and I could go on and on and on.

The root of the trouble is that this entire Moslem region is totally dysfunctional, by any standard of the word, and would have

been so even if Israel would have joined the Arab league and an independent Palestine would have existed for 100 years. The 22 member countries of the Arab league, from Mauritania to the Gulf States, have a total population of 300 millions, larger than the U.S. and almost as large as the EU before its expansion. They have a land area larger than either the US or all of Europe.

These 22 countries, with all their oil and natural resources, have a combined GDP smaller than that of Netherlands plus Belgium and equal to half of the GDP of California alone. Within this meager GDP, the gaps between rich and poor are beyond belief and too many of the rich made their money not by succeeding in business, but by being corrupt rulers. The social status of women is far below what it was in the Western World 150 years ago.

Human rights are below any reasonable standard, in spite of the grotesque fact that Libya was elected Chair of the UN Human Rights commission. According to a report prepared by a committee of Arab intellectuals and published under the auspices of the U.N., the number of books translated by the entire Arab world is much smaller than what little Greece alone translates. The total number of scientific publications of 300 million Arabs is less than that of 6 million Israelis. Birth rates in the region are very high, increasing the poverty, the social gaps and the cultural decline. And all of this is happening in a region, which only 30 years ago, was believed to be the next wealthy part of the world, and in a Moslem area, which developed, at some point in history, one of the most advanced cultures in the world.

It is fair to say that this creates an unprecedented breeding ground for cruel dictators, terror networks, fanaticism,

incitement, suicide murders and general decline. It is also a fact that almost everybody in the region blames this situation on the United States, on Israel, on Western Civilization, on Judaism and Christianity, on anyone and anything, except themselves . . .

The only way to fight this new “popular” weapon is identical to the only way in which you fight organized crime or pirates on the high seas: the offensive way. Like in the case of organized crime, it is crucial that the forces on the offensive be united and it is crucial to reach the top of the crime pyramid. You cannot eliminate organized crime by arresting the little drug dealer on the street corner. You must go after the head of the “Family”.

If part of the public supports it, others tolerate it, many are afraid of it and some try to explain it away by poverty or by a miserable childhood, organized crime will thrive and so will terrorism. The United States understands this now, after September 11. Russia is beginning to understand it. Turkey understands it well.

I am very much afraid that most of Europe still does not understand it. Unfortunately, it seems that Europe will understand it only after suicide murders arrive in Europe in a big way. In my humble opinion, this will definitely happen. The Spanish trains and the Istanbul bombings are only the beginning. The unity of the Civilized World in fighting this horror is absolutely indispensable. Until Europe wakes up, this unity will not be achieved.

It is worth noting that while Harari’s views concerning the origin of the turmoil in the Middle East may be shared by an increasing number of Americans, they are, as he indicates, certainly not the prevailing opinion in Europe, where blaming Jews for the woes of the world is an ancient pastime, and the popular view of militant Islam is that a confrontation can be avoided

by a studious effort to “do business” with some of the filthiest and most fanatical members of the radical Islamic establishment.

And thus the United States finds itself in a position familiar to fans of old Western movies. The one that comes to mind is the classic High Noon. The bad guys are fanatics. They have no interest in negotiations. They will get off the train prepared to fight to the death. They have no fear of dying. They

have no compassion. The good guy has few friends who will be much help in the fight. There’s no one around to whom he can shift the blame. He must go it alone. He must face the enemy because the enemy demands it. And there’s no place to run.

In the movie, Gary Cooper wins. In America’s battle against Islamic fanatics, it will win also. But the music won’t be as good. In fact, it will be awful.

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