

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

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THEY SAID IT

“Bush will win and will win in a walk, despite protestations to the contrary from both Republican and Democratic strategists... [He] will become the first President since his father sixteen years ago to be elected with an absolute majority of the popular vote.”

--*Steve Soukup and Mark Melcher,*
“The Political Forum Domestic Politics Forecast,”
January 12, 2004

THOUGHTS ON THE ELECTION

Many of you have, I'm sure, read so much about the election over the past couple days, that some of what follows will be redundant. I will try to offer insights and analysis that you are not likely to find elsewhere, but given the sheer magnitude of the story and the related fact that every pundit, pollster, journalist, columnist, blogger, and political hack in the entire world is writing about it, there is bound to be some overlap. Anyway, here goes.

The first thing that Democrats did in the wake of the election loss was to begin the process of assigning blame. This is standard fare for them. Whenever they lose, and lose big – which, over the last twenty-five years or so, has been quite often – they always open their post-election reflections with finger pointing.

Sometimes they blame the candidate, as they did in 1988, after the dull and lifeless Michael Dukakis got crushed by George H.W. Bush. Sometimes they blame the party's campaign strategists, who either took the party too far left, thereby alienating independents, or too far right, thereby abandoning the party's base. And sometimes they blame the electorate, as they did in 1994, after “simple-minded” voters fell for the equally simple-minded “Contract with America” and elected a GOP majority to both houses of Congress.

This year, things are no different, at least so far. Some analysts are blaming Kerry for being an unlikable, Lurch-like, blue-blooded stiff, who made several mistakes in the heat of the campaign. Some are blaming Democratic Party leaders and campaign advisors for a host of alleged sins, including compressing the primary/nomination period, hosting the national convention too early, and relying too heavily on domestic issues, when Iraq was the only thing that mattered. And some are blaming the voters, who were too dumb to know that Saddam had nothing to do with 9/11, too lazy to get out and vote their interests, or too “Christian” or bigoted (which they take to mean the same thing) to discern what is best for their country.

Subscriptions are available by contacting:

The Political Forum 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Phone 540.477.9762 Fax 540.477.3359 melcher@thepoliticalforum.com www.thepoliticalforum.com

There are, of course, kernels of truth in a few of these explanations. As Mark and I predicted last February, part of why Kerry lost was because “when people came to know him they found that they didn’t particularly like him.” He was indeed a bad candidate, personally liked by few and largely bereft of personality and charm. Likewise Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe lived up to the description we gave of him way back in February 2001, when we described him as having the “tinniest of tin ears, when it comes to retail politics.”

It is also true that the Kerry campaign strategists were no better than their candidate, lurching as they did from far left to center and back again, depending on the day and the issue. And the electorate was, in fact, very different than it was in 2000, with a significant number of voters citing moral issues as critical in their decision making.

But in the final analysis, the real problem that John Kerry and his party faced was that their intellectual underpinnings are incompatible with those of the majority of Americans. It is that simple.

Democrats may console themselves with the fact that they continue to pull nearly half of all votes in national elections, but this is an historical relic. The fact that the Democrats still benefit disproportionately from the support of those who have always been Democrats (e.g., minorities, union workers) serves merely to hide from the party’s elites that their beliefs and values are out of synch with those of most Americans. Until they figure this out, and do something to address it, the Democrats can resign themselves to permanent minority status, picking up a national-level election here and there, but never fully recapturing their former glory.

Given this, I offer to the Democratic Party establishment a handful of suggestions.

First, I think they should expunge the word “Vietnam” from their vocabulary. Then they should expunge from their collective memory any of the lessons they believe they learned from Vietnam, because they learned the wrong lessons.

In the couple of days since the election results became clear and the exit polling data were organized and distributed, I have heard Democrat after Democrat marvel at the fact that a good number of respondents declared their unhappiness with the war in Iraq, yet voted for the candidate who started that war. This, they claim, is absurd.

It appears never to have occurred to the Democratic elites that unhappiness with the war, or even opposition to it, doesn’t necessarily translate into opposition to the President or support for the Democrats.

There are, I am certain, a great many Americans who think that the war was unnecessary, is going badly, and should have been run better, but who also believe that it is the height of irresponsibility to call the Commander-in-chief a liar, to assume automatically that American motives in the region are suspect (blood for oil, “empire”), and to declare the removal of a murderous dictator a “mistake,” thereby giving hope to the enemy while our troops are still in harm’s way.

The Democratic elites believe that the lessons of Vietnam revolve around the American government’s capacity to do evil when it exercises military force in the national interest and the responsibility of “average Americans” to stop this evil no matter what it takes to do so. During and immediately after Vietnam, today’s liberal leaders learned to be embarrassed by American power and to be openly and loudly dismissive of its potential to make the world a better and safer place. Needless to say, these aren’t exactly the lessons most Americans learned.

Given the fact that they have won only three presidential elections since Vietnam (one by default over the party of Watergate and two during the brief respite from history that was the 1990s), would expect that Democrats would eventually be alerted to the fact that their Vietnam obsession has, in the eyes of a majority of their countrymen, rendered them incapable of providing for the security of the nation at times when security is important. Vietnam-induced defeatism doesn’t play in most of the country, but

three-plus decades into the debate, liberals still seem blissfully unaware that this is the case.

So while the Democrats and their allies in the media drone on endlessly about quagmires, war atrocities, and mistakes predicated on lies, greed, and corruption, the vast majority of Americans think “for good or bad, we’re there now, so let’s kill the bad guys and finish what we started.” Voters may not agree wholeheartedly with President Bush’s tactical approach to Iraq or the broader war on terror, but that doesn’t mean that they are therefore willing to support a party that acts as if it believes not only that we shouldn’t kill the bad guys but that it is not a settled matter that the Iraqi “insurgents” are actually the bad guys.

A second, related suggestion of mine is that Democrats should seriously consider removing any and all liberal Baby Boomers from positions of power and responsibility within the party. And certainly they should never consider nominating one for President again. I know that their ranks would be pretty thin should they do this. But as long as the overbearing, time-warp-trapped aging hippy Boomers continue to dominate the ranks of the party’s leadership, Americans will be reminded of the dreadful impact that these self-absorbed goofballs have had on the nation and the politics of the left.

Maybe it’s just me, but given the difficult global circumstances in which America finds itself today (and which are wholly unrelated to George Bush), I think it might be better for the Democratic Party if it didn’t constantly remind voters of its shameful history of undermining public support for soldiers fighting a determined enemy half a globe away, thereby encouraging the enemy and ensuring ignominious defeat.

So if the liberal Boomers can’t get rid of the bongos, the tie-dye, the guitars, the Jimi Hendrix albums, and their obsession with events that took place 35 years ago, then maybe its time for Democrats party to get rid of them. Heed your own advice, folks. Move on.

The third major suggestion that I would offer the Democrats is that they should try very hard to

understand the significance of the “moral issues” cited by roughly 20% of voters as being the determining factor in their vote. I know that there have been some on the left who have addressed the issue in the few days since the election, but generally speaking, they have either made light of it or have completely and utterly misunderstood it. “Moral issues” isn’t just code for gays; and it isn’t code for abortions. Certainly these issues are important to voters who place “moral issues” high on their list of considerations. But the concept of morality in public life is much broader and richer than that, at least where these voters are concerned.

Mark and I have written dozens of stories over the years about how liberals and conservatives generally operate under different moral codes. The problem here for Democrats is twofold. First, a majority of Americans embrace the more traditional moral system that is by and large incompatible with the modern liberal morality. Second, the Democratic Party’s elites are openly hostile to anyone who earnestly embraces the traditional conception of morality. They thus manage to alienate voters who might otherwise be willing to give a Democrat the benefit of the doubt.

With regard to this second point, consider the example of gay marriage. We are, of course, likely to hear for several years about how Karl Rove is an evil genius who knew how to exploit the homophobic bigotry of the traditionalists and evangelicals, drawing them to polls with the promise of being able to vote against gay marriage (in 11 states) and getting them to pull the lever for George Bush while they were there.

But the issue of gay marriage as understood by conservative voters had little to do with the question of whether homosexuality is a sin or whether gay people are good or bad. It had to do with the idea that the people should be able to decide such an issue, fraught as it is with social implications, for themselves, as befits a democratic society, rather than have it imposed on them by a liberal judicial elite.

Good luck trying to tell that to the liberal elites, though. As far as they’re concerned, anyone who would even question their orthodoxy on gay marriage

is a bigoted, backward bumpkin. Indeed, in their eyes anyone who questions the liberal orthodoxy on any issue of morality is a hayseed undeserving of being taken seriously.

One need look no further than the editorial page of *The New York Times* to see this liberal arrogance and condescension already in full bloom. In today's *Times*, for example, liberal economist Paul Krugman expresses perfectly liberal disdain for and ignorance of normal Americans, calling Republican voters "intolerant" and suggesting that they were "motivated, above all, by their opposition to abortion and gay rights (and, in the background, opposition to minority rights)."

Of course, Krugman's superciliousness hardly distinguishes him from his liberal *Times* colleagues. In yesterday's paper, columnist and liberal icon Maureen Dowd put together a list of all the awful things she could think of to say about the election, and when she got to John Thune, the former Congressman who upset Senate Minority leader Tom Daschle in South Dakota, she sneeringly called him "an anti-abortion Christian conservative - or 'servant leader,' as he was hailed in a campaign ad." To Dowd, to her readers, and to the Democratic elites whose values they share, that was an insult. But it's hard to imagine that too many Bush voters would be inclined to share this conclusion that being a Christian designates Thune as an undesirable.

If the Democrats are ever again going to be the majority party in this nation, they must not only ditch this disdain for those who hold traditional moral beliefs, but they have to find a way to appeal to them as well. *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen suggested yesterday that the Democratic party needs to find another politician like Bill Clinton who can be "comfy" talking about religion. This, of course, is a large part of the reason I suspect that liberals will never effectively reach these voters. Anyone who uses the phrases "value voters" and Bill Clinton in the same column and doesn't do so ironically, clearly doesn't get it. And Cohen is far from alone.

THOUGHTS ON THE SECOND TERM

Like a lot of Americans, I spent considerable time watching election-night television, post-election TV coverage, and reading election news on the web and in the papers. The following are a few observations on some of the questions that were discussed by the pundits and politicians in these various venues.

U.S. RELATIONS WITH EUROPE. One of the issues that seemed to be of particular interest among pundits was whether President Bush will seek to improve relations with America's traditional European allies, particularly France and Germany. No one I saw or read provided a convincing answer to this question because no one seemed to understand that Bush's attitude toward Europe is not an issue in itself but a derivative of other much more important issues. Here's what I think.

By all accounts, President Bush's overarching concern since the events of September 11, 2001 is American security. He clearly believes that the threat of another attack is real. And he knows that there is a possibility that such an attack could be devastating beyond imagination, if nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons are involved. As a result, he understands that nothing is more important than preventing such an attack, which means that he must do all he can to neutralize the enemy's offensive capability. If France and Germany are helpful in his endeavor during coming years, then their relations with the Bush administration will be warm. If they are not helpful, then relations will be less warm. It's that simple.

The Europeans seem to be obsessed with the subject of U.S./European relations. My guess is that President Bush feels much the same way on this subject as Ayn Rand's architect hero Howard Roark did when he first met Ellsworth Toohey, who hated Roark and was devoted to destroying him. Toohey says, "Mr. Roark, we're alone here. Why don't you tell me what you think of me? No one will hear us." And Roark says, "But I don't think of you."

I believe that from Bush's perspective, U.S. relations with Europe are incidental to the greater cause. He would appreciate help from the Europeans. But if the help comes at the cost of what he considers to be concessions regarding America's long-term security interests then he will do without it. So the relevant question is not whether Bush will seek to improve relations with France and Germany, but whether these two nations will be more helpful in America's fight against its enemies than they have been in the past.

My guess is that U.S./European relations will improve in the near-term and deteriorate again in a year or so when the U.S. once again goes on its own to deal with such nations as Iran, Syria and North Korea. I suggested this a few weeks ago in an article entitled "Some Thoughts On Foreign Alliances," and explained it this way.

The European nations have a very different attitude toward the threat of terrorism than does the United States. And this attitude is based on real differences in the vulnerability of each nation to the threat and on friendships and business arrangements that each nation has within the Muslim world. During the mid-1950s, when little John Kerry was growing up in Germany, America and Europe shared a common enemy and a common view as to how to deal with this enemy. Thus a strong, protective alliance not only made sense, but had a good chance of success. This is not the case with the modern day threat of terrorism.

France is a good example of why this is so. Unlike the United States, it has a very large, poor, and restive Arab immigrant population in its cities that it fears and wishes to keep as tranquil as possible. It also has extensive business ties, both open and surreptitious, with Muslim nations that are up to necks in sponsoring terrorism. And it has a long history of anti-Semitism, which gives its politicians a very different attitude toward the Arab-Israeli conflict than the United States has.

has anything to do with the question of whether Bush's approach to the terrorism threat is the correct one. All that matters is that he thinks it is, and that the Europeans disagree. And this brings us to the next topic that seemed to be of importance to the pundits on TV in recent days.

THE "WAR ON TERROR. The consensus among pundits seems to be that President Bush is anxious to hold elections in Iraq and then begin to lessen U.S. military involvement in the Middle East as the new Iraqi government gains strength and authority. I agree that he is anxious to hold elections and to turn as much authority as possible over to the new Iraqi government. But I also think Bush sincerely believes that America's long-term security is dependent on regime changes in both Iran and Syria. And I think he will do all he can to see that this comes about in the next four years.

I think he will begin this project with grand displays of cooperation with Europe's efforts to convince Iran to give up any and all programs that would give it a nuclear weapons capability. This happy process could last for quite some time. But, as I indicated above, I think that it will eventually become apparent that Iran has no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons program and that the Europeans have no intention of doing anything substantive about it, and at this point the United States will begin looking for alternative approaches for dealing with Iran.

Last July in an article entitled "Bush Unbound," I said that I thought that the United States would go on the military offensive sometime soon after President Bush is reelected, and that the principal target will be Iran. Today, because of European efforts to prevent such an action, I would drop the word "soon." But I will stick by the following thoughts from that article.

I simply cannot imagine that President Bush will spend his second term sitting on his hands watching as Iran and North Korea build nuclear weapons. And I cannot help but assume that if he finds that he cannot prevent these two states from becoming

nuclear powers with non-military measures, then he will, to paraphrase his own words, militarily “confront the threats before they fully materialize” . . .

Nor can I imagine that Bush will sit back and watch quietly as Iran aggressively supports the insurgency in Iraq, thus threatening what is certainly the most important foreign policy initiative of his first term and what is likely to be the historical centerpiece of his entire presidency . . .

The restraints that exist against preemption are political, not military. And while these political restraints are real, they are not insurmountable, especially given the fact that George Bush will, if reelected, not have to be concerned about reelection. And interestingly, he will not even have to be concerned about the election of his Vice President, who is unlikely to seek office again when this term is up . . .

In short, if anyone thinks that George Bush will not actively strive in his second term either to win the war on terror decisively or at least to reduce significantly the enemy’s capability to threaten the United States in the future, then he has not been paying attention to this man.

DOMESTIC POLICY. As I listened to a seemingly endless chain of discussions among the “experts” about Bush’s domestic agenda in the days following the election, I was struck by the number of people who seem to believe that Bush might “reach out” to Democrats in Congress in order to fulfill his pledge of four years ago to be “a uniter, not a divider,” and to honor his pledge of a few days ago that he would work to gain the support of those people “who voted for my opponent.”

Now I don’t doubt that President Bush would like to be a unifier, and even thinks of himself as one. But my guess is that relations between the White House

and the Congressional Democrats are going to be brutal and bloody during the next couple years.

It may be true, as many pundits have stated during the last several days, that the Democrats would have to make a sharp move to the center if they hope to become politically competitive again. In the meantime, however, it is important to understand that after Daschle is replaced, the leadership of the Democratic Party on Capitol Hill will be almost entirely made up of rabid, left wing ideologues, who will fight with every tactic and tool available to them to block every important initiative that comes out of the White House, including privatization of a portion of Social Security, major changes in the tax code, and placing conservatives on the bench. That is their nature as individuals, and right now they have no leader to unite them behind any other strategy.

Last week I predicted that gridlock would be the defining term for Congress if John Kerry were to become President. With Bush in for four more years, I think the term gridlock will be replaced by the word carnage. Not only will this suit the angry Democrats for the time being, but it will eventually develop into a Republican strategy for winning additional Senate seats in the 2006 elections.

ELECTION NOTES:

• **John Edwards** It is nearly universally agreed among the pundits that Hillary Clinton’s chief competition for the Democratic nomination in ’08 will come from John Edwards, this year’s Vice Presidential nominee. We doubt it. After watching the campaign in its entirety, right up to the concessions speeches on Wednesday, we have determined that John Edwards is even more unlikable than John Kerry. Kerry’s concession was possessed of tact, dignity, and a certain grace. Edwards’s speech had none of those things. We doubt whether most Americans could stomach him for another four weeks, let alone four years.

As for Edwards as a running mate, we believe he will go down in history as one of the worst. I know that

conventional wisdom holds that running mates don't make a difference, but I think the last two elections prove this truism wrong. Dick Cheney played a very important role in the election of George W. Bush in 2000, by providing strength, experience, and gravitas. Edwards, in contrast, hurt Kerry.

As the campaign wore on and as health care became an increasingly important issue, Edwards became a heavier and heavier anchor around Kerry's neck. It was difficult, if not impossible for Kerry to argue that his administration would do something about skyrocketing health care costs, when his running mate was a one-time ambulance chaser who contributed personally to the litigation-related portion of those costs. An issue that should have been a huge positive for Kerry was never fully exploited, largely due to his running mate's culpability in creating the problem.

• **Zogby.** Pollster John Zogby has long enjoyed the reputation as the nation's most accurate big-time forecaster, a reputation he solidified in 2000 when he was the only pollster to detect the late shift to Al Gore and to call the popular vote for the then-Vice President. Regular readers know that we took issue with Zogby's predictions and methodology repeatedly throughout this campaign, suggesting among other things that his likely voter screens were inaccurate, as they reflected a pre-9/11 electorate. We were not, of course, the only ones to question Zogby's numbers, as he made several conspicuous adjustments to his data that caught the attention of a number of right-leaning editorialists and bloggers. Those who doubted Zogby should, in light of Tuesday night's results, feel vindicated.

For starters, it turns out that Zogby was flat wrong about how best to weight party identification in his polls, just as many of us suggested. In the October 11, edition of "Politics, Et Cetera," we wrote that:

Zogby's presidential tracking poll uses a weighting scheme of 39% Democrats, 35% Republicans, and 26% Independents, which is roughly the same breakdown in party ID as has been generated by exit polls

taken over the last handful of presidential elections. This scheme makes a certain amount of sense, but, in my opinion and that of a great many others, it ignores the shift in partisan affiliation to the GOP since 9/11.

As it turns out, party affiliation in this election broke exactly evenly, with Republicans and Democrats each comprising 37% of the electorate, meaning Zogby's models were weighted far too heavily in favor of Democrats.

Of course, this was hardly Zogby's greatest flub in the 2004 election. On Tuesday night, after the polls had been open for more than ten hours, Zogby went on national TV and "boldly" made his final predictions: calling a landslide for Kerry, 311 electoral votes to 227. We don't mean to kick the guy when he's down, but for the life of us, we'll never understand what exactly he thought he was seeing. With all the resources available to him, he should have been able to come a little closer than that.

Heck, two guys we know, sitting around in their jammies in their respective basements, put together a forecast that was far closer to the mark than Zogby's. For the record, on our scorecard, we missed on Hawaii, Wisconsin, and the Senate race in Colorado. Other than that, we were spot on, including being almost precisely right on the popular vote split.

• **Exit Polls.** For the second presidential election in a row, the exit poll data that was provided to the media and campaigns throughout the day on Tuesday was completely removed from reality. The polls showed a huge Kerry victory, buoyed the expectations of the Kerry camp, dampened the spirits of conservative bloggers, reportedly sent the President's team scrambling to write a concession speech, and proved virtually dead wrong. Now everyone wants to know what happened.

Some, like former Clinton strategist Dick Morris, have suggested that the polls may have been intentionally manipulated specifically to hurt the President's

chances. Others have suggested that the poll numbers were accurate, meaning that the actual vote totals were manipulated (look for such conspiracies to run rampant on the left for some time). Still others have suggested that the samples were skewed (too many women, too many urbanites, etc.) and that this screwed up the data, making it impossible for accurate results to be gathered.

We have a simpler explanation. The exit polls appear to be garbage because they were misused by the media and others and taken as a solid indicator of the early course of the voting, despite the fact that the numbers were incomplete and highly unreliable. Since we are not polling experts, we'll allow Jay Cost, a.k.a. "Horserace Blog," who is a polling expert, to do the honors. To wit:

Ignore the exit polls . . . The raw numbers trickling out are just that . . . raw. Exit polling is heavily "scrubbed" at the end

of the day to account for turnout in each precinct, to account for pre-existing demographic sensibilities (i.e. samples are re-jiggered for sex, race, income, etc). These raw numbers obviously cannot be scrubbed in this matter. This means that the MOE [margin of error] is so high for Bush and Kerry that they are basically useless. What's more . . . you don't know what kind of data out there is reliable or not -- it is all rumour and innuendo.

Cost's explanation was seconded by Mark Blumenthal, a.k.a. "Mystery Pollster," who gave a longer and more technical explanation, saying virtually the same thing: exit polls are great and highly accurate, when read properly, i.e. at the end of the day, when all the numbers are in and they have been cleaned up.

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