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**THEY SAID IT**

“The war in Iraq has become a war against the American occupation. . . . The U.S. military presence has become part of the problem, not part of the solution. . . . The first step is to confront our own mistakes. . . . No matter how many times the Administration denies it, there is no question they misled the nation and led us into a quagmire in Iraq. . . . As in Vietnam, truth was the first casualty of this war. . . . As a result of our actions in Iraq, our respect and credibility around the world have reached all-time lows. . . . Never in our history has there been a more powerful, more painful example of the saying that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. . . . The nations in the Middle East are independent, except for Iraq, which began the 20th century under Ottoman occupation and is now beginning the 21st century under American occupation.”

--Senator Edward Kennedy, January 27, 2005

“Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

“This much we pledge—and more.”

--President John F. Kennedy, January 20, 1961

(Hat tip: OpinionJournal's "Best of the Web.")

**THREE CHEERS FOR DEMOCRACY.**

I have been generally optimistic about the elections in Iraq. In my first-of-the-year forecast piece, dated January 3, I said that I thought the election would come off as planned in late January and that this would be the basis for the establishment of a new Iraqi government during the year. I noted that the on-going insurgency has provided a great many Iraqis with an enemy other than America against whom to unite and that the election has given them a means to express their displeasure with the insurgents. Finally, I said that the election would provide President Bush and the Iraqis with a green light to bring serious pressure to bear on Iran and Syria.

But aside from viewing the election as a springboard for heating things up in the Middle East, I have not had much to say about its historic significance. While watching television coverage of this event on Sunday, I wondered how I could have failed to recognize this. Certainly, I was influenced by a realization that many serious stumbling blocks litter the path that leads from a single election to the formation of a truly democratic government in Iraq. But that's a poor excuse for overlooking the extraordinary historical importance of an Election Day in that troubled Arab land. By any measure, and regardless of how it all turns out, this was a very big deal.

- It was a big deal for President Bush, whose vision of a stable, peaceful, and democratic Middle East took a giant step forward last week in the face of widespread criticism, skepticism and outright opposition, both at home and abroad.

- It was a big deal for the Democratic Party, which appears to be in the early stages of betting its future on the failure of Bush's policies in Iraq. This is a politically dangerous bet under any circumstances. Like a "Don't Come" wager at a craps table, the crowd doesn't like it even if it turns out to be a winner. But in this case, it is especially hazardous because it takes on the appearance of hoping for the country to fail. (Watch for Hillary to try to extricate her party from this loser's position, which has its roots in the bitterness of such senior party losers as Ted Kennedy and John Kerry.)

- It was a big deal to the French, the Germans, and others like them who desperately do not want America to succeed in transforming Iraq into a peaceful, prosperous nation run by a government that appreciates and respects U.S. help in deposing a brutal dictatorship, since, among other things, that would endanger the existing brutal dictatorships with whom these nations still have considerable commercial intercourse.

- It was a big deal to men and women throughout the world who live under oppressive dictators, for it provided them with a glimmer of hope.

- And finally, it was a big deal for the Iraqi people, who, despite clear and present threats on their lives, turned out in impressive numbers to assert their right to participate in choosing a leader for their country, thus forcing many skeptical Americans (like myself) to admire their courage and to renew their support for their efforts to form a respectable government.

I still have some doubts about the future of democracy in Iraq, as well as some complaints and concerns about the Bush administration's approach to the region. But these reside within a sincere hope that all of my reservations are wrong and that the Bush administration's dream of a democratic Middle East will be realized.

In any case, this is not the week to write about doubts and concerns. (I shelved that article yesterday afternoon.) This is a week to honor those millions of Iraqis who braved terrorist threats to take that first giant step toward a democratic state. And it is a week to offer prayers for the American men and women who died to help make this happen, for those who are today risking their lives in this effort, and for the families of all of them.

## ABORTION WAR DÉTENTE?

The Democratic Party's historic and, to party stalwarts, heartbreaking loss last November has resulted in palpable bitterness and embarrassing pettiness on the part of party leaders. This suggests not only that the GOP has emerged as the nation's true majority party, but also that the Democrats are not yet ready to launch a meaningful counterattack, their leaders being occupied instead with public displays of childish petulance and other examples of the kind of behavior that led them into the minority in the first place.

But while there should be little doubt that the party is, indeed, facing a major crisis and will continue to struggle in the near term, suggestions that the Democratic base will continue to atrophy indefinitely are premature at best. The Democrats clearly have many, many problems, but history demonstrates that

when political parties are forced to confront their shortcomings, as the Democrats are today, they can be expected gradually to adopt positions more in tune with those held by the majority of voters. Such adjustment may, as in the case of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Republicans, take considerable time. But it will happen.

Over the next several weeks, I will take a look at some of the ways that the Democrats are likely to try to salvage their party. Some of these, including the one addressed in this piece, hold great promise for Democratic resurgence. Others show the likely continuing degeneration of the Roosevelt coalition that brought the party to prominence and therefore suggest that it is entirely possible that the Democrats' fall has not yet reached its nadir.

Which trends matter more, both in the short term and over the long haul, will, of course, depend on how well the leaders of both parties exploit the opportunities presented. Republicans have a chance to consolidate their majority status over the next several election cycles, but that consolidation is far from assured. As classicist and Cheney advisor Victor Davis Hanson put it last week: "There is . . . no guarantee that the Democratic party is going to stay politically suicidal." Indeed, on some crucial issues, it appears that some Democrats may already understand the failures of the past and see the potential benefits of modifying and moderating their positions.

Last week, for example, at an event marking the 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision that compelled the legalization of abortion in all 50 states, Hillary Clinton gave a speech in which she distilled the sentiments of some of the more perceptive Democrats on the issue of abortion and its effect on their party.

Hillary told the somewhat surprised crowd of abortion supporters that "there is an opportunity for people of good faith to find common ground in this debate - we should be able to agree that we want every child born in this country to be wanted, cherished, and

loved," and that "we can all recognize that abortion in many ways represents a sad, even tragic choice to many, many women."

To pro-lifers, Hillary's words of conciliation undoubtedly rang hollow, recognizing the tragedy of abortion, but coming nowhere near acknowledging the sanctity of life or conceding the inherent iniquity of the act. And they are right. On a moral or metaphysical level, this was small potatoes. But on a political level, Hillary's concessions were anything but small. If these concessions are more than just spin and truly represent a willingness on the part of prominent Democrats to moderate and compromise on the issue of abortion, then one of the most significant and, for Democrats, most damaging battles in the Culture War may, over the next several election cycles, lose some of its importance.

The Democrats' problems on abortion, as Mark and I have noted before, are manifold and growing. Chief among these problems is the rigid, doctrinaire nature of abortion supporters' position on the issue, a topic to which Mark dedicated an entire story in October, 2003. In "The Abortion Gambit," he put it thusly:

The principal problem they [abortion supporters] face is that they have taken a position that cannot be compromised, which means that they are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to convincing the center that they are the reasonable ones. And this means that even if they know that the principal tactic of the opposition is to chip away at their "right to choose" argument one chip at a time, they can do very little in response except get angry, bluster publicly, and make doomsday predictions.

The pro-life movement, on the other hand, has made a conscious decision not to make the perfect the enemy of the good, which is appealing to the moderate, compromise-oriented center.

Another, related problem for Democrats is the dwindling public support for legalized abortion; not just partial-birth or late term abortions, mind you, but abortion in general, at any time during a pregnancy. Evidence of this waning support is both statistical and anecdotal. For example, a *Los Angeles Times* poll taken less than two weeks ago showed that a solid majority (53%) of Americans believe that abortion at any stage of pregnancy should be illegal. In contrast, only 43% thought abortion should generally be legal, and a mere 24% agreed with the Democrats' default position that abortion should be legal at all times under any circumstances. These results are in keeping with other polls taken over the last couple of years, all of which show decreasing general support for abortion, and a majority now opposing the procedure altogether.

There is, as I noted above, also increasing anecdotal evidence of growing support for the pro-life movement, particularly among younger Americans. At last week's March for Life here in Washington (which also commemorated the 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the *Roe* decision), some interesting and exceptional protestors showed up to join in the battle against abortion. As *The Christian Science Monitor* put it, among the marchers was an "unlikely contingent – two dozen anti-abortion students from the University of Pennsylvania." The *Monitor* continued:

The robust presence of "Penn for Life," both on campus and off, signals a heightened debate – at Penn and elsewhere – about an issue once thought all but settled in the more elite halls of the academic world.

"At the national level, we've noticed a uniform increase in on-campus pro-life activity," says Michael Sciscenti, president of American Collegians for Life, whose pre-march conference saw attendance grow from 70 students three years ago to 350 students, representing 70 universities, this year. Perhaps most interesting has been the growth at some of the country's most

prestigious institutes. Princeton, MIT, Yale, and Stanford are among the campuses that today have active groups that oppose abortion rights.

There are, of course, a number of social, religious, demographic, political, and scientific factors at work here, all of which help, in part, to explain why the American public has slowly but surely come to believe that abortion is a less-than-desirable practice. If nothing else, it has become increasingly impossible for a good many to continue to believe the fiction that an "unborn child" is a mere "blob of protoplasm" in the face of medical science's ability routinely to save babies born as early as 22 or 23 weeks and 4-D ultrasounds that show that a "fetus" looks and acts remarkably like a "baby."

There is little question that the pro-choice side's radicalism has played a significant role in alienating erstwhile lukewarm supporters. By refusing even to consider reasonable compromise on the issue, no matter how trivial, pro-choice advocates allowed themselves to appear cold, callous, and willing to put abstract ideological principal above everything else, including the lives of millions of unborn children.

Even Al Gore's 2000 campaign manager and longtime Democratic strategist Donna Brazile seems to be wondering about the political efficacy of the pro-choice stance. She put it this way recently. "Even I have trouble explaining to my family that we are not about killing babies."

For decades, the pro-abortion forces have tried to link the fight for "choice" with the other great fights of the 1950s and 1960s, like the war on poverty and, most especially, the Civil Rights movement, claiming that securing abortion rights was a crucial step in the "liberation" of women and the realization of equality for all Americans. The problem for the pro-choice movement is that, outside of the already converted true believers, few Americans ever bought the analogy, and indeed, many found it at least mildly offensive. Whereas the Civil Rights movement was a noble

struggle for true freedom and justice, the fight for “choice” always seemed to many observers as more than a little self-interested, the protestations of the “choice” advocates notwithstanding.

It appears now that uncompromising self-interest will eventually turn a majority of people off, even if it is shrewdly cloaked in the phraseology of “rights” and freedom. After Hillary’s speech last week, *The Wall Street Journal’s* Holman Jenkins summed up the “choice” argument’s fall from grace thusly:

The abortion issue pits two real values – personal autonomy versus respect for life – between which Americans are gradually shifting their view. In an aging country where couples spend billions on fertility treatment, the “passion” of the pro-choice side increasingly strikes adults as absurd and a bit repugnant. How can anyone be passionately in favor of abortions? How can even pro-choice liberals fail to be impressed that anti-abortion advocates are at least passionate about something worth being passionate about?

The pro-abortion side never succeeded in putting over that they were defending a principle, rather than just defending a convenience for teenagers who want to avoid parental recrimination.

Given all of this, it is hardly surprising that Hillary Clinton would want, at long last, to end the Democratic Party’s abortion liability. As much as I hate to say it, Hillary has become a very smart politician, arguably the smartest nationally prominent elected Democrat in the nation. More to the point, her chief political advisor, her husband, is smarter still, and one of the shrewdest politicians in living memory. It makes perfect sense for them to take the first step in defusing the most enduring and one-sided of the cultural issues that, in part, decided each of the last three national elections (2000, ’02, and ’04). In short, it is smart politics.

*Slate* magazine’s William Saletan suggests that Hillary’s gambit is beyond smart, and is, in fact, visionary. “Clinton isn’t trying to end the abortion war,” he wrote last week, “She’s repositioning her party to win it.” While Saletan is almost certainly right that Hillary and Bill see winning the abortion war as their mission (they’ve always had more than a touch of Gnosticism about them), I am not as convinced as he appears to be that such a victory is one the Clinton’s can achieve.

For starters, in order even to consider pursuing a strategy of compromise on abortion on a practical level, Hillary will have to convince the pro-choice hardliners who dominate the Democratic Party base that the tradeoffs will be worthwhile. Though she is certainly the perfect candidate to undertake such a mission, possessing both the prerequisite feminist/liberal *bona fides* and an affiliation with successful centrist politics, this task will still not be an easy one.

Some of Hillary’s fellow Democrats were receptive to her offer of compromise, but a great many others were less than thrilled, and a number of longtime abortion activists actually professed feelings of betrayal at her comments. One “pro-choice Democrat” told the liberal political magazine *The American Prospect* that when she heard Hillary’s abortion speech, “My head lifted off my shoulders and spun around, I was so mad.” Such comments were not entirely atypical.

If Hillary – or any other Democrat for that matter – is ever going to address the issue of abortion and compromise, then the abortion dead-enders with spinning heads will have to be convinced that any compromise will produce tangible benefits.

Second, Hillary and any other abortion conciliators will have to convince a significant segment of the voting public that they are serious about compromise and are not merely trying to spin the issue for political advantage. This too will be a tough sell. Not only does Hillary have a history of and reputation for crass political spin, but she also has a voting record and political history that do not exactly demonstrate that she is capable of “moderation” where abortion

is concerned. On this latter count, the immediate reaction to Hillary's speech by Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, was particularly telling. To wit:

I think she's trying to adopt a values-oriented language, but it lacks substance, at least if you compare it to her record. If you look at Senator Clinton's voting record on this issue, it's like Planned Parenthood's condoms – it's defective.

Perkins has a point. Planned Parenthood gives Hillary's Senate voting record a perfect score, and, as *National Review Online* editor Kathryn Lopez noted last week, "the great compromiser" even voted against last year's Unborn Victims of Violence Act, a.k.a. "Laci and Connor's Law," perhaps the most innocuous "pro-life" bill to come up for a vote in many, many years.

Finally, the success of any attempt to soften Democrats' radical image on abortion will depend heavily on the party's collective ability not to veer off into greater and more prominent extremism on other important cultural issues, thereby undercutting the message of conciliation. Given the sheer rage that appears to have taken hold of a great many Democratic legislators, particularly on the reactionary/Blame America First front of the culture war, this may be the greatest obstacle of all.

If the Democrats continue to let the likes of Ted Kennedy and John Kerry appear in front of national audiences and reiterate the al-Zarqawi talking points

on Iraq and the War on Terror, then no one outside of a few political junkies (including yours truly) will ever even notice that other Democrats are trying to compromise on abortion, much less allow such a compromise to affect his or her vote. Unless the petulant children can be silenced, any abortion compromise proposal will likely fall on deaf ears.

All of that said, I continue to think that offering to compromise on abortion is smart politics for the Democrats. There is no question that the party has been hurt and hurt badly by its radicalism on this issue. And a departure from that radicalism will hardly make things worse, and may, in fact, make them better.

*First Things* founder and editor-in-chief Father Richard John Neuhaus, among others, has made a strong and eloquent case that the abortion issue was the critical component in the Republican realignment that began in the late 1960s; the issue most responsible for luring traditional Democratic voters, most notably Southerners and Catholics, away from their historical political home to the GOP. If Father Neuhaus is right (and I tend to think his case is a strong one), then the Democrats' ability to turn the issue around and, at a very minimum, stop allowing it to damage them, may dictate their ability to halt the realignment and prevent the GOP from establishing itself as the semi-permanent majority party. From the look of things, Hillary and Bill surely think so.

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