

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

“The dominant ideology of our time -- secular, determinist, materialist liberalism -- is rabidly hostile to the heroic. Secularism and materialism deny the very existence of the soul and the reality of the transcendent perfection for which it yearns, thus denying the reality and validity of that yearning and with them the ultimate incentive for all true heroism. Determinism exculpates its believers from responsibility for their faults, hence relieving them of any need to improve themselves and removing the spur to heroic conduct. It denies people credit for their virtues, hence denying their worthiness of admiration and emulation. Thus the spread of liberalism has worked insidiously to purge the world of heroes. What survives as popular ‘heroes’ seldom merits the name: athletes, rock stars, movie and television actors; mere entertainers all.”

--From an article entitled “Thank You Tommy,” which appeared in the Summer, 1995 issue of *Modern Age*, written by John Attarian, a free-lance writer who lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan until his death just two months ago.

LITTLE MEN WITH LITTLE IDEAS.

I have always enjoyed the controversy that Hegel and Carlyle stirred up with their extravagant views of the importance of heroes to the grand sweep of history. Hegel seems to have started it all when he became so excited about seeing Napoleon ride past after the Battle of Jena in 1806 that he formulated an entire theory of history around the concept that all human activity was moving according to a providentially determined plan and that certain “world historical” men were the driving force behind each stage in this natural progression.

Carlyle took a very different approach to the subject in 1841 in his well known little book *Heroes, Hero-Worship and The Heroic in History*, arguing, in effect, that great heroes weren’t simply important tools in the historical process but actually drove the forces of history by the strength of their own character and will.

Elaborating on Hegel’s theory, Marx and Engels argued that the predetermined plan for history had nothing to do with providence but was driven entirely by secular economics. As they put it in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” According to this dynamic duo, to the degree that “great men” are involved in this process at all, their role is simply to prepare men for the revolutionary social changes that are on the way and to organize the struggle. Years later, in a letter written in 1894, Engels added the following thought.

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Subscriptions are available by contacting:

The Political Forum LLC 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842

Phone 540.477.9762 Fax 540.477.3359 melcher@thepoliticalforum.com www.thepoliticalforum.com

That such and such a man and precisely that man arises at that particular time in that given country is of course pure accident. But cut him out and there will be a demand for a substitute, and this substitute will be found, good or bad, but in the long run he will be found. That Napoleon, just that particular Corsican, should have been the military dictator whom the French Republic, exhausted by its own war, had rendered necessary, was an accident; but that, if a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place, is proved by the fact that the man has always been found as soon as he became necessary: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc.

Herbert Spencer was, I believe, the first individual to take a formal position in opposition to the determinism of Hegel, the romanticism of Carlyle, and the materialism of Marx and Engels. He observed that historical change occurred as a result of a “long series of complex influences,” and that while a particular individual might be the proximate cause of any decisive event, no single individual could be said to have caused the social conditions that set the stage for the event itself. As regards a hero’s influence, Spencer put it this way: “Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.”

Now I mention this two-centuries-long intellectual discussion, which is still going on today, because I kept thinking about it last week as I watched the television coverage of the President of the United States meeting with the leaders of France and Germany, Europe’s two largest and most important nations, both of which are facing an assortment of the kinds of monumental demographic, social, and economic problems that have, throughout history, been the causes of wars, revolutions, and economically crippling interruptions in commerce. And it occurred to me that, given this situation, this would be an opportune time for the kind of “pure accident” mentioned by Engels, in which a hero is “found as soon as his presence becomes necessary.”

Yet, I could not escape the conclusion as I watched the festivities that it would be difficult to assemble a more petty, pedestrian, and unimaginative group of candidates for greatness than Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schroeder, and any member of that band of faceless bureaucrats in Brussels who collectively constitute the contemporary political leadership of Europe.

Now leaders come and go, of course, and heroes do have a way of appearing on the scene at unexpected moments as Engels noted, which is part of what makes history interesting and the future unknowable. In fact, troubled nations and regions are the breeding ground for history’s heroes, since, as Bertolt Brecht famously insinuated in this great play *Mother Courage*, nations with no problems have no need for heroes.

On the other hand, contrary to Engels’ assertion, heroes do not always present when necessary. If they did, Rome would still be the world’s greatest power. Over several centuries, that nation produced one hero after another at opportune moments, and then one day, like Little Jackie Paper, they came no more, at least not to Rome. Instead, when the need for a hero became most pressing, Rome got the feckless Flavius Augustus Honorius and Rome’s immediate enemy, the Visigoths, got the necessary hero in the form of the Alaric, who sacked the Eternal City in 410. History records that when Honorius, who was hiding in Ravenna, was told that Rome had perished, he became quite upset thinking that the messenger was referring to his pet chicken by that name.

Now I don’t know whether Hegel, Carlyle or Marx ever considered this turn of events in the context of their thoughts on the role of heroes in history. If they did, my guess would be that Hegel attributed it to providence; Carlyle undoubtedly became aglow over the heroism of Alaric, as he did over the regicide of Cromwell; and Marx probably proclaimed it as an early example of the natural revolutionary movement of the proletariat rising up against the bourgeoisie.

I think the more likely explanation is that Roman society had become “rabidly hostile to the heroic” for the reasons outlined by John Attarian in the “They Said It” section above. As with Europeans today, the Romans had abandoned all interest in the transcendent in favor of the sensate, had adopted nihilism as their *de facto* state religion, had allowed their armies to become too weak to fight effectively, and had become obsessed with base forms of entertainment. This served to quell those noble virtues, such as patriotism, a devotion to duty and honor, and respect for the glory of God, which move men to perform heroic deeds.

This in turn left the Romans vulnerable on many levels to the Visigoths who were religious, united by tribal patriotism, generally disciplined in pursuit of their pleasures, and devoted to each other and to their families; who in short, lived within societies that were not hostile to the heroic but tended to promote exemplary warriors and determined statesmen.

Now I am not predicting here that Europe is destined to fall as Rome did. But as I said earlier, I could not help but feel as I watched Jacques and Gerhard last week that Europe may have become “rabidly hostile to the heroic” as Rome did, and may thus be facing the problems of a declining and aging population, a deteriorating international competitiveness, an increasingly unmanageable welfare state, and most importantly, a hostile and growing Muslim population within its midst with the kind of leadership that has neither the wisdom nor the courage to make and enforce the types of choice, that will be necessary to avert disaster.

To put this another way, I agree with the following observation made by columnist Mark Steyn yesterday in his *Chicago Sun-Times* article entitled, “U.S. Can Sit Back and Watch Europe Implode.”

Most administration officials subscribe to one of two views: a) Europe is a smugly irritating but irrelevant backwater; or b) Europe is a smugly irritating but irrelevant backwater where the whole powder keg’s about to go up.

For what it’s worth, I incline to the latter position. Europe’s problems -- its unaffordable social programs, its deathbed demographics, its dependence on immigration numbers that no stable nation (not even America in the Ellis Island era) has ever successfully absorbed -- are all of Europe’s making. . . .

Until the shape of the new Europe begins to emerge, there’s no point picking fights with the terminally ill. The old Europe is dying, and Mr. Bush did the diplomatic equivalent of the Oscar night lifetime-achievement tribute at which the current stars salute a once glamorous old-timer whose fading aura is no threat to them. The 21st century is being built elsewhere.

In closing, I would just say that if I were a European, I would be afraid that the next hero to appear in my country would be a Muslim, whose heroic deeds will be aimed at destroying my country, my culture, and my society. I would fear that this hero’s determination to succeed on behalf of his God and his culture would overwhelm the secularism, materialism, nihilism and corruption of my comfortable world and its little leaders with their little ideas. I would be afraid that my world was drifting slowly in the direction of some sort of disaster and that my leaders were actually paddling along with the flow as a short term measure to keep the ride from being bumpy.

I sincerely hope that a hero will emerge when necessary to save Europe from itself. I also sincerely hope that my concerns are unfounded, that Jacques and Gerhard, their counterparts in the other European nations, their compatriots in Brussels, and those who will follow all of them in their posts will rise to the ramparts with brave hearts and strong arms if the need arises. Given the troubles that lie ahead, I would not be surprised if the opportunity for all of them to demonstrate heroism does not occur within the next decade or so. But I fear that if someone doesn’t step forward with courage and vision, they will all be in serious trouble.

HEROES, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

Like Mark, I was moved by world events to write this week about heroes. But unlike Mark, I will not discuss heroes in the abstract, preferring to leave such esoteric discussions as to whether history creates heroes or heroes create history to him and to focus instead on real-life heroes, and one in particular whose effect on the world has been immeasurable, if often ignored.

It is undoubtedly difficult to remember today, particularly given the rise of radical Islam and the ubiquitous threat posed by Islamist terrorism, but roughly three decades ago, the world was unarguably in dire straits even than it is now. Between the omnipresent threat of nuclear annihilation and the appearance at least that the Western world was losing the great global battle of wills to the atheistic, expansionist, Communist nations behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains, the future at times looked pretty bleak, to say the least.

But from this desperate circumstance, three heroes – three people of extraordinary courage, determination, and faith – emerged onto the global scene almost simultaneously. And within a decade, the three collectively had altered the course of world events by reinvigorating the West, restoring hope to much of humanity, and setting the stage for the ultimate defeat of the totalitarian socialist threat that had plagued the globe for some eight decades.

Sadly, those heroes are all but gone now. Last summer, one of the three, former President Ronald Reagan, finally passed on from this world, after having been silenced by the ravages of disease for nearly a decade. Two years earlier, another, former Prime Minister Lady Margaret Thatcher, had been forced into permanent semi-seclusion and silence by a series of small strokes and rapidly deteriorating health, permitted by her doctors to emerge from her isolation only on the rarest of occasions and under the most extraordinary of circumstances. And the third, Pope John Paul II, the only member of this extraordinary

triumvirate who remains active on the global public stage, is himself suffering the ravages of disease and last week reminded the world of his own mortality, making it clear that he will, inevitably and likely before long, succumb to a combination of the effects of his condition and old age.

There are those who suggest that the Pope should follow Reagan and Thatcher into history sooner rather than later; that, because of his deteriorated health and his inability to perform his job in the manner to which the entire world has grown accustomed during his quarter-century-plus pontificate, he should leave the global stage voluntarily and make way for a younger, more physically fit man to carry on as the Vicar of Christ.

These critics quite simply don't understand the ongoing heroic nature of the Pope's mission. More to the point, they fail to grasp the monumental challenges that will confront the 265th Pope, whoever he is, when at last he becomes Bishop of Rome. For while Pope John Paul II's pontificate has clearly been remarkable on many levels, it is perhaps most remarkable for the precedent it has set for his successors. As the Pope's biographer George Weigel recently put it:

The papacy has traditionally claimed a global role; the pontificate of John Paul II has given specific meaning and empirical texture to that claim. The cardinals who will elect the next pope know this. And as they ponder the implications of that remarkable fact, they will know something else: they will know that, in an important sense, they will be electing a pope for the world as well as the Church....

John Paul II's retrieval and renewal of the evangelical and pastoral papacy – a papacy of preaching, teaching, witness, and encouragement – has changed the Church's expectations of popes, and the world's too.

By now, the tale of the current pope's heroism in the face of the Soviet menace is the stuff of legend. The world is quite familiar with Karol Wojtyla, the young Archbishop of Krakow, who, upon the sudden demise of the 34-day papacy of John Paul I, was elected Pope and proceeded to reach out forcefully and compassionately to his fellow Slavs, who had for decades been denied the full expression of their faith by their Soviet occupiers.

The world knows how, early in his pontificate, Pope John Paul II visited his homeland, inspiring hundreds of thousands of Poles, including unemployed electrician Lech Walesa, and hundreds of thousands of other Catholics living under the boot of Soviet oppression, including Czech Cardinal (and thorn in the side of the Czechoslovak Communists) Frantisek Tomasek. It well remembers how the Pope declared his support for Walesa's Solidarity movement and intervened with Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev to stop a planned crackdown on the trade union. And certainly it recalls how the Pope, like Reagan before him, reached out his hand to Mikhail Gorbachev as the Soviet empire crumbled around him, helping to ensure that that empire's demise would be a relatively peaceful one.

But certainly Pope John Paul II's heroics go far beyond simply standing up to and helping to ensure victory against the communists. The fall of the Soviet Union was only the beginning of the Pope's message of individual freedom under God and of his efforts to promote the spiritually conducive nature of "democratic capitalism." The following, which is drawn from the Pope's 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, is something Mark and I have run in these pages before, but which encapsulates nicely the vast enterprise the Pope undertook upon the emergence of much of the Catholic world from communism.

[T]he fundamental error of socialism is anthropological in nature. Socialism considers the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the

socioeconomic mechanism. Socialism, likewise, maintains that the good of the individual can be realized without reference to his free choice, to the unique and exclusive responsibility which he exercises in the face of good or evil. Man is thus reduced to a series of social relationships, and the concept of the person as the autonomous subject of moral decision disappears, the very subject whose decisions build the social order. From this mistaken conception of the person there arise both a distortion of law, which defines the sphere of the exercise of freedom, and an opposition to private property. A person who is deprived of something he can call "his own" and of the possibility of earning a living through his own initiative comes to depend on the social machine and on those who control it. This makes it much more difficult for him to recognize his dignity as a person and hinders progress toward the building up of an authentic human community.

In contrast, from the Christian vision of the human person there necessarily follows a correct picture of society. According to "Rerum Novarum" and the whole social doctrine of the church, the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the state, but is realized in various intermediary groups. Beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and culture groups which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy, always with a view to the common good. This is what I have called the "subjectivity" of society which, together with the subjectivity of the individual, was canceled out by "real socialism."

If we then inquire as to the source of this mistaken concept of the nature of the person and the "subjectivity" of society, we must reply that its first cause is atheism. It is by responding to the call of God contained in the being of things that man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity. Every individual must give

this response, which constitutes the apex of his humanity, and no social mechanism or collective subject can substitute for it. The denial of God deprives the person of his foundation and consequently leads to a reorganization of the social order without reference to the person's dignity and responsibility.

The atheism of which we are speaking is also closely connected with the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which views human and social reality in a mechanistic way. Thus there is a denial of the supreme insight concerning man's true greatness, his transcendence in respect to earthly realities, the contradiction in his heart between the desire for the fullness of what is good and his inability to attain it, and above all, the need for salvation which results from this situation.

Finally, Pope John Paul II's current and likely his last struggle, his personal battle against Parkinson's disease, is perhaps the most heroic of all. In refusing the advice of those who think he should step down "for the good of the Church" and in continuing to fulfill his mission, the Pope has truly and heroically accepted his role as "Christ on Earth," teaching the value and power of suffering. As the indispensable religious philosopher and author Michael Novak put it over the weekend:

What a Pope does is be another Christ. What does Christ have to do, except be? And the comparative advantage of Christianity is that it roots itself in suffering, the suffering of age that each of us will undergo, of cancers and disabilities and mental illness in the family, the inescapables of every life. Secular humanism ignores these. Professor Rawls thinks Christian emphasis on suffering is life-denying. Not so. I think that's why so many people are touched by JPII. They know all about suffering, but nobody ever says how ennobling and transformative it can be. That it's quite all right to be ill and suffering. That it's a great and valuable gift. That it means a lot. That

it's at the heart of things. In a way, the Pope is teaching more powerfully about Christianity and its comparative advantage than he ever has. The most important work of his life.

Now, if you think that all of this means that the eventual successor to John Paul II will have some awfully large shoes to fill, you're right. It is not for nothing that many scholars within the Church, including my personal favorite, *First Things* publisher Father Richard Neuhaus, consider this pontificate to be among the most significant in the 2000-year history of the Church and believe John Paul II to be one of the greatest men of the last century.

That said, the current pope's courageous and mission-expanding pontificate provides his successor with the opportunity to "accept the heroic" as well and thereby to advance the well-being not just of the Catholic Church but of humanity at large. The aforementioned George Weigel, who in addition to being Pope John Paul II's biographer is a Senior Fellow and past President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, spoke recently about the most pressing issues that will face the next pope. And among the challenges he detailed was one that will require the type of courage and conviction demonstrated by Pope John Paul II in the face of Soviet Communism and which, if as successfully addressed, will likewise improve the personal, political, and therefore spiritual condition of millions of people worldwide.

In Weigel's estimation, the issues that will dominate the next pontificate include: "the virtual collapse of Christianity in its historical heartland – Western Europe"; "the Church's response to the multi-faceted challenge posed by the rise of militant Islam"; and "the questions posed by the biotech revolution." Certainly all three will test the next pope appreciably, and certainly all three will require a heroic effort if they are to be successfully addressed. But for the purposes of this short article and for purposes of comparison to the current pope, the most immediately pressing of the three challenges appears to be addressing the "multi-faceted challenge posed by the rise of militant Islam."

As Weigel notes, the question of how best to address radical Islam is one that, like the question of Soviet Communism before it, occupies the attention and imagination of not just the Catholic Church but of “free societies throughout the world.” While the world’s political leaders (e.g. George W. Bush) address the issue by eliminating threats and encouraging the implementation of political reform, Weigel suggests that the Church, under the leadership of the next pope, will work most effectively to promote solutions to the problem from within the religious tradition of Islam, to determine if “Islam can find within its sacred texts and legal traditions the internal resources to ground an Islamic case for important facets of the free and virtuous society, including religious toleration and a commitment to the method of persuasion in politics.”

The gist of Weigel’s argument is that the Catholic Church, if it chooses to take a “more forthright approach to [the] manifest aggression” sanctioned by radical Islam will be, essentially, to lead by example. Though clearly the Church never sanctioned the kind of violence currently advocated by some religious leaders within the radical factions of Islam, as Weigel notes, “one can draw a rough (all right, very rough) analogy between pro-civil society Islamic scholars and religious leaders today and those Catholic intellectuals and bishops who were probing toward some sort of intellectual *rapprochement* with religious freedom and democracy as the *ancien regime* was crumbling in Europe throughout the nineteenth century.”

In short, then, the challenge the next pope will face with regard to Islam will be to convince Islamic religious leaders that religion and modernity need not be mutually exclusive, to use the Church’s experiences in coming to grips with the modern world as both an example and a model for Islamic renewal, and to adopt a “strategic approach,” using the Church’s enormous global power to help identify and encourage those Islamic religious leaders who are “best positioned to leverage needed change in their co-religionists’ self understanding of Islam’s role in public life.”

If the next pope is even marginally successful in this task, then it is quite possible that he, like John Paul II before him, will prove to be truly “heroic,” as he will help produce a geopolitical transformation that radically improves the condition of millions of souls worldwide. I have neither the space nor, frankly, the expertise to discuss this issue in any great detail, but it seems to me that while Weigel doesn’t spell it out in so many words, the process of reconciling religious doctrine with modernity and the development of political institutions that encourage liberty and tolerance are indissoluble. It is no mere coincidence that the labor of reconciling Catholic doctrine with the modern world and therefore of charting the course of the modern Church was largely performed by the very same man who established the principles of “natural law” and therefore charted the course of modern liberal democracy, namely St. Thomas Aquinas.

In his piece on Natural Law and its effect on the Bush administration’s foreign policy a couple of weeks ago, Mark didn’t go deeply enough into the foundations of the philosophy to discuss Aquinas. But others, including Catholic scholar Jodie Bottum, have rightly noted that the guiding principles in the development of the Bush foreign policy are “Thomist,” meaning that they derive from those principles articulated by Thomas Aquinas. So while President Bush is attempting to establish in the Muslim world political institutions based on the principles of Natural Law, the likely task of the next pope, at least according to George Weigel, will be to encourage the internal development of the philosophical and religious foundation needed to buttress those institutions.

It is therefore distinctly possible that the next pope, like Pope John Paul II, will, in the process of carrying out his mission as head of the Church, also collaborate with the American President in confronting evil and transforming the world. This is, by no means, to suggest that the pope will take the side of the Americans. It is merely an acknowledgement of the fact that during the two great global conflicts of the age, America has had the distinct good fortune of

being led by men who have been willing to confront evil in the name of good and therefore to take the side of the pope.

At the end of his piece this week, Mark wonders whether Europe will be able to produce a political hero “with courage and vision” enough to save the continent from “serious trouble.” Like Mark, I’m not particularly optimistic on this count, but I do have

some faith that it may not matter. If the next pope is able to embrace John Paul II’s legacy of heroism – and that very legacy makes such an embrace eminently possible – then the cumulative yet discrete efforts of the American President and the Catholic Church may prove heroic enough to save Europe from itself – again.

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