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## THEY SAID IT

“Before proceeding to criticize Utopian engineering in detail, I wish to outline another approach to social engineering, namely that of piecemeal engineering . . . The piecemeal engineer will, accordingly, adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good. This difference is far from being merely verbal. In fact, it is most important. It is the difference between a reasonable method of improving the lot of man, and a method which, if really tried, may easily lead to an intolerable increasing in human suffering.”

*The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper.

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## FOUR YEARS LATER.

These are very good times, you know. They are not perfect. And there are enough dark clouds on the horizon to keep one constantly aware that serious trouble could erupt at any moment in any number of venues. But this week, rather than chew on the rag of trouble, I thought it would be worthwhile to note that there are many things happening both at home and abroad, in this the beginning of the fifth year of the Bush presidency, that represent some welcome progress in the never-ending battle for prosperity, security, domestic tranquility, and good government.

I don't intend this to be either a narrative of happy talk or a comprehensive list of White House accomplishments. I am simply recognizing that the constant harping by prominent Democrats about how bad things are and what a mess the President has made of the world, all of which is accentuated by the media's natural concentration on disturbing matters, tends to mask the positive trends and events which taken together provide a picture of what I think historians are likely to view as a relatively good period in this nation's history.

Before I begin, I would like to note for the record that I am aware that the twin deficits are large and potentially harmful, that Americans are dying in Iraq, that American society is decaying in many important areas, ranging from health care to education to common decency, and that some baby boomers are likely to face rough financial times during their upcoming retirement years.

I am also aware that Yellowstone National Park could erupt into violent volcanic action at any moment, and in doing so could cover nearly the whole of the United States west of the Mississippi with ash, which could in turn destroy all agriculture in that region for decades to come and produce climate changes that could bring humanity to the brink of extinction. At least, that's what I read in my latest favorite book of all time, Bill Bryson's *Short History of Nearly Everything*. According to Bryson, since its first known eruption 16.5 million years ago, Yellowstone has blown up about a hundred times, averaging one massive blow every 600,000 years. Bryson notes that the last one was 630,000 years ago, which means, as he put it, "Yellowstone, it appears, is due."

But as I said earlier, I thought I would concentrate this week on the bright side of things. A good place to begin would be with an overview of the issues that are occupying the time and energy of America's politicians today. An examination of this sort doesn't always provide a perfect picture of the health of a nation's economy and society, but it can be instructive, nevertheless.

For example, if a country's politicians are desperately involved in seeking ways and means to keep employment and production from dropping to catastrophically low levels, as the leaders of France and Germany are doing this time, this is usually a pretty good sign that things aren't well with the economy. Or if these same politicians are desperately grappling with rapidly rising racial tensions and crime rates, as is the case in France and Germany, this can be interpreted as a sign of significant social problems.

If, however, the principal domestic economic legislative initiative of a nation's leader, say for example President Bush, is a long-term plan to keep the federal retirement program from going bankrupt *30 years hence*, then an impartial observer might conclude that the present day economy is not in any apparent danger of an immediate meltdown. In fact, if, as is the case with the United States today, the principal point of the always-present doomsayer community is that some terrible economic disaster *may* happen if some action

isn't taken by the government *sometime during the next several years*, then this too can be seen as a sign that the economy is doing reasonably well at the present.

And then, of course, if the agenda of the liberal party of a given nation, like maybe the Democratic Party in the United States, is no longer focused on grand, comprehensive expansions of government authority with names like the New Deal and the Great Society, but instead is obsessed with the fact that gay couples cannot get married and young girls *might* lose the opportunity to have abortions on demand in a handful of states, then one could reasonably conclude that the great bulk of a society's problems in the realm of poverty, inequality, discrimination, and racial tensions have been reduced to a very low level.

And finally, if the upper body of a nation's legislative branch, say for sake of argument the U.S. Senate, has nothing better to do than to tear itself apart over the confirmation of a few federal judges, or the appointment of an ambassador to an international organization that ranks among the most corrupt and useless in the history of the world, then one could reasonably conclude that no truly important issues are pressing their agenda, which in turn could indicate that the nation itself is in pretty good shape.

In the early days of the Republic, in a similar situation, Congress would have adjourned and the nation's legislators would have gone home to pursue their various occupations. But today very few members of Congress have any marketable skills beyond retail politics, so when there is nothing important to do, they stay in Washington and squabble endlessly over petty issues, thus providing grist for the 24-hour news cycle and its devoted fans across the nation, who apparently have little to do themselves.

I would argue too that the United States is experiencing a period of generally positive developments on the international front. For example, in the case of China, which arguably poses the most significant potential long-term military threat to the United States, virtually all signs are moving in a positive direction from the standpoint of American security.

Certainly, China is developing a powerful military, and certainly this is for the purpose of eventually challenging the United States interests across the globe, and particularly in Asia. But as a practical matter, it seems very unlikely that China's leaders would risk any sort of military confrontation with the United States in the foreseeable future, given that China is a large buyer of American debt and is extremely dependent on U.S. consumers to keep its fragile economy growing. Relative to this last point, it is worth keeping in mind that a consumer boycott of Chinese goods, including textiles, is not beyond the realm of possibility and could become even more likely if China were suddenly to become militarily threatening.

Over the longer term, it is worth noting that Japan is in the process of building a substantial military machine in anticipation of China's future plans for military hegemony in Asia. Thus, if China were to break bad at some future point, the United States is likely to have important help near at hand. Furthermore, China is in the early stages of some exceedingly difficult social, demographic, financial, and political problems, which many observers, including Steve and I, believe could eventually bring down the current totalitarian regime there, ushering in a much more friendly democratic leadership.

And what about Russia? How can the recent picture of President Bush sitting side-by-side with Vladimir Putin watching a parade celebrating the end of World War II be anything but a sign of good times for the United States internationally? Certainly, as I have often said in these pages, Putin is no great friend of America or champion of the kind of government that the United States would like to see in Russia. But Russia has come a long way from that time in the fall of 1962, when Jack Kennedy risked nuclear war to prevent the Soviet state from placing missiles in Cuba. And this is a positive situation for those of us who were told in grade school to hide under our desks if a nuclear war began with "the Russians."

But it is not only America's improved relations with its potential and former enemies that mark this period in history as a good one for the United States. India,

for example, is finally beginning to realize some of its vast potential as a modern, democratic state. And what could be better for the world than to have another large and successful example of the social and economic benefits of freedom and free enterprise, especially when juxtaposed against the failing states of Old Europe, which have moved toward more socialism as India has moved in the other direction.

Now as I said earlier, I am aware that the United States is at war in Iraq and that this stretches the definition of "very good times." But with that as a given, the question then becomes whether this war is likely to result in the enhancement of American security. World War II, for example, did in fact enhance American security. The Vietnam War did not. I believe that the "War on Terror," the war in Afghanistan, and the war in Iraq already have. Hence, I think historians will view this period, despite these wars, as a positive one in America's quest for peace and security both at home and abroad.

Now, I am not going to attempt to make a detailed case for this position because the arguments on each side are quite well known. I will simply say that I believe that the world is a significantly safer place today for Americans and American interests as a result of the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. And I further believe that this will continue to be the case regardless of how successful America is in helping to form representative governments in these nations.

But I should say that I am growing increasingly supportive of the White House's democratization initiative both in Iraq and around the world. As regular readers know, I have been quite skeptical about this project since the President began to talk publicly about it shortly after the war in Iraq began. But several factors have come together lately to convince me that my skepticism concerning this project was not entirely warranted.

The first of these factors was, of course, the election in Iraq, when Iraqis from all walks of life and all regions of the country turned out to vote in the first

free election in their lifetimes, many of them doing so at the risk of their lives. Only a fool would fail to recognize the positive aspects of such an event, both as regards Iraq's future and the dreams and aspirations of citizens who live under the thumb of totalitarian regimes around the world. The second factor in my conversion has been the recent efforts on the part of Iraqis to make this experiment in democracy work, despite being attacked viciously and relentlessly by a cult of murderous killers. There have been glitches, of course, and more are likely. But the process is moving along, in large part due to the extraordinary courage and determination of a large number of ordinary Iraqis. And this is a fine thing.

Then, very recently, I happened to have reason to read through my beat up, old paperback copy of Karl Popper's classic book on democratic politics *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, and I came upon a passage that made me think long and hard about the wisdom of fighting tyranny with democratic initiatives, even if the end result is not likely to be the total acceptance of democratic ideas and ideals.

I will close with the relevant passages from Popper's book that have convinced me to become more open to President Bush's democracy initiative. Not only do these paragraphs go a long way to explain why the Bush plan is intellectually sound, but they demonstrate, in their own way, a central premise of this piece, namely that this period in American history is likely to be regarded favorably by future historians, because it is a period in which a good fight is being fought by good people for a good cause.

The theory I have in mind is one which does not proceed, as it were, from a doctrine of the intrinsic goodness or righteousness of a majority rule, but rather from the baseness of tyranny; or more precisely, it rests upon the decision, or upon the adoption of the proposal, to avoid and to resist tyranny . . . If we make use of the two labels as suggested, then we can now describe, as the principle of a democratic policy, the proposal to create, develop, and protect, political institutions for

the avoidance of tyranny. This principle does not imply that we can ever develop institutions of this kind which are flawless or foolproof, or which ensure that the policies adopted by a democratic government will be right or good or wise-or even necessarily better or wiser than the policies adopted by a benevolent tyrant. (Since no such assertions are made, the paradox of democracy is avoided.) What may be said, however, to be implied in the adoption of the democratic principle is the conviction that the acceptance of even a bad policy in a democracy (as long as we can work for a peaceful change) is preferable to the submission to a tyranny, however wise or benevolent.

Seen in this light, the theory of democracy is not based upon the principle that the majority should rule; rather, the various equalitarian methods of democratic control, such as general elections and representative government, are to be considered as no more than well-tried and, in the presence of a widespread traditional distrust of tyranny, reasonably effective institutional safeguards against tyranny, always open to improvement, and even providing methods for their own improvement.

He who accepts the principle of democracy in this sense is therefore not bound to look upon the result of a democratic vote as an authoritative expression of what is right. Although he will accept a decision of the majority, for the sake of making the democratic institutions work, he will feel free to combat it by democratic means, and to work for its revision. And should he live to see the day when the majority vote destroys the democratic institutions, then this sad experience will tell him only that there does not exist a foolproof method of avoiding tyranny. But it need not weaken his decision to fight tyranny, nor will it expose his theory as inconsistent.

## THE CASE FOR HILLARY.

Late last month, the *National Journal*, a highly respected, non-partisan periodical covering politics and policy, revealed the results of its first informal 2008 presidential survey, which gauged the opinions of 175 “Washington insiders” (members of Congress, political strategists, etc.) about likely frontrunners for the respective parties’ nominations. While the results of this first poll are hardly shocking, they are a little surprising and more than a little interesting.

On the Republican side, the survey showed quite clearly that there is, at this point, no solid frontrunner, which is hardly unexpected. The GOP primary race is likely to be more competitive than it has been in decades, given that there will be no incumbent and, presumably, no pre-anointed favorite. As James Barnes, author of the *National Journal* summary piece, noted, if Jeb Bush is serious about not intending to run, then 2008 will be the first year since 1976 that someone named Bush or Dole hasn’t won the GOP’s Iowa caucuses, which, of course, weren’t held in 1984, when Reagan ran unopposed for re-nomination. Normally it’s the Democratic field that is both crowded and competitive, but barring some unforeseen change of circumstance, 2008 will bring an interesting and largely unprecedented battle for the GOP nomination.

Of course, none of this is terribly astonishing. But what is surprising – or at least is likely surprising to those of you who are not Virginians – is that the “insiders” surveyed by *National Journal* appear to believe that the potential candidate who comes the closest to being a frontrunner is Virginia Senator, former Governor, and namesake to his Hall-of-Fame Redskins coach father, George Allen.

Though largely unknown outside of Washington and Virginia, Allen is a talented politician, a prodigious fundraiser, and a generally affable and likable guy. Chuck Todd, the editor of *National Journal*’s “The Hotline,” labeled Allen the “dark-horse frontrunner” and compared him to the current president, declaring that “Allen is W.” Meanwhile, *National Journal*’s Charlie Cook, one of the most respected pollsters and political

prognosticators in the business and publisher of the revered *Cook Political Report*, made an even more flattering comparison, calling Allen “the most natural candidate” and “Reaganesque.”

But if the early favorite for the GOP nod is something of a surprise, the early frontrunner in the Democratic crown is not. To no one’s amazement, the *National Journal* insiders tabbed former First Lady and current junior Senator from New York Hillary Clinton as the man (so to speak) to beat. Former nominee, the hopeless and hopelessly clueless John Kerry, garnered a little support from the roughly 90 Democrats surveyed, as did his former running mate John Edwards. But there is no doubt that Hillary is the “Rock Star” of the party, as *National Journal* put it, and is the clear and undisputed frontrunner. It certainly appears that the Clinton strategy of keeping Hillary out of the ’04 contest, saving her to run in an incumbent-free contest in ’08 when, moreover, party faithful would be looking to break a mini-losing streak, appears to have worked exactly as planned.

Indeed, it may well have worked better than planned. I am sure that both Bill and Hillary expected that a Kerry defeat last fall would make Hillary the early frontrunner for the next contest. But I doubt if they, or anyone else for that matter, expected her to be as far ahead of the rest of pack as she is – so far, in fact, that the percentage of Democratic insiders who expect her to be their nominee (68%) is more than double the rest of the field *combined*. *National Journal* cautions that early Democratic frontrunners, like Al Gore (for the ’04 contest), Ted Kennedy, and Mario Cuomo, are prone to falling completely off the electoral map, but it is highly doubtful that any such previous underachievers ever had a lead anywhere near as great as Hillary’s currently is.

Does this mean that Hillary is unbeatable or is the perfect candidate for the Dems in ’08? Not by a long shot. In normal times and under normal circumstances, there is little question that she would be a less than ideal candidate, or, as columnist (and author of *Primary Colors*) Joe Klein put it, she has “some very real political limitations.” Klein summed up some of those limitations thusly last week:

She has a clenched, wary public presence, which won't work well in an electorate that prizes aw-shucks informality; she isn't a particularly warm or eloquent speaker, especially in front of large audiences . . . So far, Senator Clinton hasn't shown the ease or creativity necessary to break the ultimate glass ceiling.

In addition, Hillary is haunted by many of the same ethical concerns that troubled her husband and turned the eight years of his presidency into a circus, the likes of which American voters are unlikely to want to see re-performed anytime soon. The recent fund-raising indictment and prospective trial of David Rosen, the national finance director for Hillary's 2000 Senate campaign, serve as reminders that the Clintons and their staffs have well-earned reputations for playing fast and loose with the rules, particularly where raising money is concerned. They also suggest that there is more than ample reason for Democrats to be leery of bringing the Clintons back to the fore of their party.

More to the point, there are other politicians in the Democratic Party who would almost certainly have a better chance at winning a general election than would Hillary. In the last ten presidential races, Democrats have only won three times, and both winning candidates were reasonably charming Southern governors. And right now, there are a couple very talented, charismatic, centrist Southern Democratic governors who would be far better positioned to follow in Hillary's husband's footsteps than she is herself.

Most notably, Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen, who is currently waging an important if lonely battle against his state's version of Hillary Care, stands out as a superior politician and superior potential candidate in comparison to Hillary. The same can be said, though to a lesser degree, of North Carolina's Mike Easley, who was not only re-elected in a "Red" state last November, but ran a hefty 12 points ahead of his party's presidential candidate.

But in spite of all of this, Democrats appear willing to take the proverbial plunge with Hillary and to commit to doing so right now. Why? I suspect that the reason Democrats are so anxious not simply to nominate Hillary but to agree that her nomination should be at least nominally unchallenged is because they are desperate to have someone managing the philosophical direction of their party. This is not, in my estimation, a case of the Dems settling on Hillary because they think she's electable, as the Republicans did with George W. Bush soon after the Bob Dole disaster. This is a case of the Democrats knowing that it is three long years before they will officially name a nominee, and knowing as well that the party can't afford to wait until then to have a leader who speaks on its behalf and thereby drowns out the voices of the political incompetents and fools who currently purport to speak for it.

As things stand today, the Democratic Party is in a very precarious position. The GOP controls the White House and therefore has as its leader and official spokesman a man who moonlights as the leader and official spokesman for the nation. The Republicans also hold the majority in both houses of Congress and, consequently, hold the Speaker of the House and Majority Leader slots as well. The Democrats, by contrast, control no levers of power whatsoever and are therefore at a distinct disadvantage not just in advancing their positions, but in making their case to the public on any given issue.

Though you'd never know it from the mainstream media accounts, President Bush has actually had a modestly successful first 100 days of this term, and with Democrats lacking an effective mechanism to communicate with the public, it is distinctly possible that that success will continue unabated for some time.

Republicans were the nation's unofficial minority political party for the better part of the last three quarters of the twentieth century, but they were rarely in as difficult a position as are today's Democrats. Between 1969 and today, there were only six years (1977-'80, 1993-'94) in which the Republicans did not control at least one of the levers of power in

Washington. And even in those years, the party had a *de facto* leader who spoke with an authority not matched in today's Democratic Party. For example, after his strong showing in the 1976 Republican primary, the GOP was, in many ways, Ronald Reagan's party long before he put George H.W. Bush away and officially wrapped up the nomination.

The Democrats quite simply have no one similar on whom they can count to speak for the party and to ensure that it remains politically viable. A few weeks back, I wrote an article detailing the ridiculousness of the three ostensible party leaders, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, and party chairman Howard Dean. In the intervening weeks, the evidence of their ineptitude has only grown. While Reid runs around calling the President of the United States "a loser" (while the President is on foreign soil, nonetheless), the chairman of the party, Howard Dean, is busy mocking Rush Limbaugh's addiction problems and telling the House Majority Leader that he should go home to Houston and "serve his jail time." Meanwhile House Minority Leader Pelosi can only get her name in the news by losing one of her shoes (a pinkish high heel, by the way) when she is literally swept off her feet and out of the Capitol building by Capitol Hill police.

If such a person existed, a defender of these three political buffoons might suggest that they are, despite their utter idiocy, not much worse than their current GOP counterparts. These include the milquetoast Senate heart surgeon who is so concerned about ruining his imaginary presidential hopes that he tends to avoid doing anything potentially difficult or controversial. And then there is the ethically challenged lightning rod of a House leader. But such a comparison would be inapt in addition to flat wrong. Frist and DeLay may not be destined to have Congressional office buildings named after them, but they're a far sight better than Pelosi, Reid, and Dean.

More to the point, they are not the leaders of their party. George W. Bush is. To find an apt comparison for Pelosi and Reid, one would not look at their current counterparts, but at the Republican leaders the

last time the GOP was the opposition party, which, of course, was during the Clinton Presidency. And here Pelosi and Reid look truly pitiable in comparison.

I will certainly not try to make the argument that Newt Gingrich is a perfect man or a flawless leader. But there can be little question that as a politician, a political strategist, and a tactician, he was in a different league than Reid and Pelosi. Newt was, quite often, outperformed by Bill Clinton, but he was rarely outthought. And even though Clinton remained popular throughout his presidency and will be remembered as the most cunning and talented politician of his generation, he could not outmuscle Newt, whose leadership ensured that all of the great policy battles of the Clinton presidency were fought on conservative turf. From welfare reform to capital gains tax cuts to modest spending restraint, Newt and the Republicans foisted their agenda on Clinton. Even the most imaginative among us could not even dream of circumstances where it would be possible for Pelosi and Reid to do the same to Bush. Indeed, the idea is downright laughable.

Given such a leadership void, one might assume that the venerable older members of the Democratic Party's congressional contingent would step up and take the proverbial helm, but here too the party is left desperately wanting. One look at the old "venerables" makes it clear that leadership is not this group's strong suit. Most of the competent and reasonable old timers are gone from the House, chased into retirement by the prospect of never again being in the majority, and the old school holdovers in the Senate make Pelosi and Reid look attractive by comparison. To put it as delicately as possible, any group whose principal members include Teddy "One More for the Road" Kennedy and Bob "White Knight" Byrd is a group whose leadership potential is best left untapped.

And that leaves Hillary. As the next election draws nearer, smart and sagacious pundits are likely to contend that Hillary won the 2008 nomination on November 2, 2004, the day John Kerry lost to President Bush. I think it is more likely that she became the presumptive nominee a full two years

earlier, when the House Democrats elected Nancy Pelosi to succeed Dick Gephardt as their caucus leader, thereby ensuring that the party would be deprived of a rational voice in the Congressional leadership. From that day on, the Democrats have been looking for a real leader and, except for a few brief months last year during which John Kerry thought that he had filled the role, all eyes have been focused on Hillary.

Though she may not be perfect, she's not bad. Moreover, she's the only member of the party who can claim the mantle of leadership without actually having to win it, which means that she's the only one who can eclipse the Three Stooges (Reid, Pelosi, and Dean) before the spring of 2008.

Democrats undoubtedly recall what happened to the Republicans during the last period in which they had no official or unofficial leader. In short, they got steamrolled. Throughout the 1960s, and especially after Goldwater's defeat in 1964, the GOP had no real leader and no prospects to fill the slot. And, as a result, Johnson creamed them, enacting virtually his entire liberal dream world agenda with nary a peep of opposition, in spite of the drag on his popularity created by Vietnam. Today's Democratic Party insiders undoubtedly sense, if only subconsciously, that they could face a similar fate if they fail to find a competent leader soon.

As a result, the majority of these insiders appear willing simply to turn things over to Hillary and let her run the show. Most analysts and pundits will tell us over the next several months that the unsettled nature of the 2008 GOP primary race indicates that the party is in some trouble and looks to start the next election cycle at a disadvantage. More likely, it is the Democrats who are in trouble. The desire of party apparatchiks to turn over the reins of the party to Hillary without a fight is, in and of itself, proof of a certain level of desperation. The Democrats want not only to avoid losing in November 2008, but to avoid losing every day between now and then. And many of them see no other way to preclude such losses.

Chances are they're right.

## END NOTES.

**The Inscrutable and Politically Incompetent Chinese.** One of the things that has always annoyed me about Sino-booster, who insist that China's path to global hegemony is inevitable, is the fact that they are all too ready to declare that failures of American leadership, particularly by the current administration, will facilitate China's rise to power, yet they never contemplate the possibility that *China's* leaders may prove incompetent or worse. This makes little sense, given that the electoral marketplace in the United States has a tendency to weed out a great many losers who would otherwise make it through to leadership positions in places like China, which makes leadership choices based on something other than the will of the people.

So while Bill Gates and Warren Buffett continue to bet heavily on China, it is distinctly possible that their faith in the Chinese system will be betrayed by Chinese politicians who are capable of far greater screw-ups than simply wanting to abolish the death tax. Indeed, it looks for all the world as though the Chinese leadership has made some tremendous mistakes over the past several months that may well have long-term serious negative repercussions for their country.

Take, for example, the news out of Taiwan over the weekend. The Chinese have been pushing Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian to improve relations and had, up until recently, been making some notable headway. But after a confrontational and unnecessary anti-secessionist display of legislative fervor this spring, and a similarly aggressive attempt to secure the right to purchase European weapons, the Chinese leaders appear to have overplayed their hand and reignited anti-mainland sentiment. To this end, Reuters reports the following:

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won an election on Saturday, securing a fresh mandate to pursue an independence-leaning policy toward rival China. Although the National Assembly poll was held for the

sole purpose of ratifying constitutional reforms already approved by parliament, relations with China dominated the agenda as the vote followed bridge-building visits by opposition leaders to the mainland.

Elsewhere in East Asia, Chinese aggressiveness is further complicating the situation for the would-be hegemon. As I have forecast more than once, Chinese actions in the region and inaction with regard to North Korea are bound to encourage the rapid rearmament of Japan, which will almost certainly impinge on the People's Army's efforts to control the region. Others are now seconding that expectation, concluding that Japan will indeed rearm swiftly and will thus become a real threat to China's ambitions. The following assessment of the Japanese remilitarization prospects comes from the highly respected StrategyPage military affairs web site:

Japan reprocesses plutonium for its many nuclear power plants, which gives it the ability to make nuclear weapons if it needs to, and it does have a strong space-launch capability (many ICBMs have become the means to launch satellites and other vehicles into space). Japan could have a working nuclear weapons capability in one year should they decide to.

The underlying truth is that at this time, Japan is arguably the strongest power in East Asia – and it is at this point with one hand tied behind its back. Should Japan be pushed to the point where it feels it needs to use all the military power it is capable of generating, it could readily become a superpower in military terms. Its tradition is of a highly-trained, professional force that can be a fierce adversary (as it demonstrated during World War II) would be there, and this has long worried Japan's neighbors. The only reason Japan is not a superpower is because it has chosen not to pursue that course.

I think, given all of this, that I should reiterate my conclusion from three weeks back: all things considered I don't think I'd place any long-term bets on the Chinese.

### **Newsweek, a.k.a “Sy Hersh Syndrome.”**

Remember this date: May 9, 2005. Years from now, when historians look back, that will be the date they assign to the official death of the American Mainstream Media. For it was on that day, or at least that “publication date,” that *Newsweek* ran its now-infamous story on U.S. military desecration of the Koran at Guantanamo Bay, which turned out to be poorly sourced, unverified, and, ultimately, false, but which nevertheless led to deadly riots, the endangerment of American soldiers and civilian personnel throughout the Muslim world, and a major setback in the public relations component of the war on terror.

If you are unfamiliar with the story, you won't be for long. It is a big story that will, in my estimation, grow even bigger over the next several days, until it has, at last, earned the distinction as one of the great “journalistic” screw-ups in an era rife with such events. This morning's *Washington Post* story on the fiasco – and note that the *Post* is probably going easy here since it owns *Newsweek* – begins as follows:

*Newsweek* apologized yesterday for an inaccurate report on the treatment of detainees that triggered several days of rioting in Afghanistan and other countries in which at least 15 people died. Editor Mark Whitaker expressed regret over the item in the magazine's “Periscope” section, saying it was based on a confidential source – a “senior U.S. government official” – who now says he is not sure whether the story is true.

The deadly consequences of the May 1 report, and its reliance on the unnamed source, have sparked considerable anger at the Pentagon. Spokesman Bryan Whitman called *Newsweek's* report “irresponsible” and

“demonstrably false,” saying the magazine “hid behind anonymous sources which by their own admission do not withstand scrutiny. Unfortunately, they cannot retract the damage that they have done to this nation or those who were viciously attacked by those false allegations.”

Whitaker said last night that “whatever facts we got wrong, we apologize for. I’ve expressed regret for the loss of life and the violence that put American troops in harm’s way. I’m getting a lot of angry e-mail about that, and I understand it.”

There will be much speculation over the next several weeks, particularly among those in the “new media” about whether this story is proof of an anti-American bias in the mainstream press or merely further evidence of the age-old liberal bias. While I certainly think there is at least some evidence of both, I believe that what the article actually demonstrates is the damage done to the profession of journalism by the likes of Seymour Hersh.

Hersh, you may recall, made his name as the reporter who broke the story of the massacre at My Lai and who, in so doing, became an instant and enormous hero to the anti-war left. Ever since My Lai, Hersh and those reporters who have been taught to revere him have been looking for the next big military scandal in hopes of recapturing that glory and of reasserting the notion of journalist as “champion of the truth,” willing to do anything necessary to find out “what really happened” and to expose the abuses of power by authority figures.

The problem with all of this is that it has led a great many reporters – and editors and journalism professors – to believe that it is perfectly fine, indeed necessary, to look for and report only the negative aspects of the military’s performance and to do so with utter and complete disregard for the effect that such reporting may have on the soldiers in harm’s way or on the nation as a whole. Moreover, it has taught these same journalists, including Hersh, that it is okay to stretch the truth or, as in *Newsweek’s* case, to disregard source credibility concerns if it enables them to expose the greater “reality” on the ground. In other words, these journalists have adopted as the standard for their reporting Dan Rather’s infamous interpretation that “false but accurate” is good enough. Only in this case, it’s not the incumbent Republican president who is hurt by this malleable conception of truth, but American soldiers and the greater American war effort.

It is possible that this story will blow over with no significant ramifications, though I doubt it. No matter how many times or how creatively *Newsweek*, its editors, and its publishers manage to apologize, they’ll never be able to undo the damage they’ve done. It is unlikely that they will ever be able to convince the Bush haters in the Democratic Party’s left wing, much less the Taliban-influenced Afghans, that their retraction was not coerced by sinister administration officials and that the original story was, indeed, untrue.

In the end, then, I suspect the greatest damage will be to the already sullied reputation of the mainstream media, which in and of itself is a great tragedy, given the importance of a free and impartial press to the functioning of American democracy.

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