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THEY SAID IT

Phil Connors: You want a prediction about the weather, you're asking the wrong Phil. I'll give you a winter prediction: It's gonna' be cold, it's gonna' be grey, and it's gonna' last you for the rest of your life...

Phil: I was in the Virgin Islands once. I met a girl. We ate lobster and drank pina colodas. At sunset we made love like sea otters. *That* was a pretty good day. Why couldn't I get that day over and over and over...

Phil: What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?

Ralph: That about sums it up for me.

--"Groundhog Day," starring Bill Murray, Columbia/TriStar Studios, 1993.

GROUNDHOG DAY.

For months now, the leaders of the Democratic Party and their allies in the mainstream media have suggested that the 2006 midterm election will, in many ways, be the mirror image of the 1994 midterm. That's when Newt Gingrich, Dick Arme y and the GOP revolutionaries recaptured Congress for the first time in half-a-century, taking advantage of a Congressional majority that had grown complacent and debauched and an arrogant president whose administration was badly overextended and preoccupied with its own unpopular and self-serving agenda.

According to this theory, today's Republican majority, prone to overreach on behalf of the Christian Right and corrupted by its decade in power, is ripe for overthrow and the restoration of the normal balance of power in Washington, particularly since President Bush seems intent on grasping the Third Rail of government firmly even long after the voting public has made it obvious that that rail still carries a rather lethal dose of current.

On the surface, the theory seems plausible. There can be little argument that the Republican majority has lost its way and has, to some extent or another, been corrupted by the trappings of power. The “revolutionaries” who led the GOP to power have all long since moved on to cushy private consulting or lobbying gigs, and the spirit and energy that characterized the early days of the Republican majority have been replaced by lethargy, pork-barrel profligacy, and what appears at times to be a belief that the maintenance of power is as important, if not more important than the ends to which that power is employed.

Moreover, the administration also seems to be repeating the mistakes made by the majority party early last decade, preoccupying itself with a radical domestic policy agenda that appears less than popular with large swaths of the voting public. Whereas the '94 midterm was preceded by nearly two years of the Clintons' single-minded and foolishly inflexible focus on unpopular health care reform, it appears that the '06 election will follow two years of focus by the Bush team on a Social Security reform agenda that has also failed, at least thus far, to capture the public's collective imagination.

All that said, those who are looking for '06 to be a repeat of '94 and for the Democrats to sweep back into power are almost certainly bound to be disappointed. For nearly a dozen reasons, the expectations of the Democrats and mainstream media expectation that the GOP can and will be dislodged from its majority next year is unduly optimistic at best. In previous pieces, I have briefly discussed some of these reasons, including the treacherousness of the political terrain for Democrats and the party's lack of sane, competent leadership. I will address many of the others in future pieces, including the recruitment of candidates, the raising of campaign cash, the design and execution of strategy, and the dubious nature of the “shock” polls showing the President and the Congressional GOP in serious trouble.

Today, though, I think it will be more than sufficient to address the most glaring reason not to expect a Democratic takeover next year, namely the party's positively astounding capacity for self delusion, which manifests itself in almost complete obliviousness to the messages sent by voters last fall and, for that matter, in every preceding election since Vietnam. Indeed, it appears much more likely to me that it is the Democrats who will, in fact, prove Santayana's genius and repeat history.

After last fall's drubbing, you may recall, Democrats declared themselves sufficiently chastened and swore that they would be more sensitive to and understanding of the purportedly all-important “values voters” who told exit pollsters that questions of morality played a preeminent role in deciding for whom to vote.

Hillary Clinton and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, to name just two, made concerted efforts both to apologize to “values voters” for seeming to ignore them and to emphasize their party's own religious and moral *bona fides*. Just this weekend, in fact, party Chairman Howard Dean, a man who left the church of his youth in a dispute over a bike path, reiterated his party's newfound religious convictions, declaring that “We have not spoken about moral values in this party for a long time,” but “Democrats are going to stand for moral values.”

Of course this is true. Everyone stands for some set of moral values, and makes decisions based on moral criteria. As any game or rational choice theorist could tell Dr. Dean, making “moral” decisions and assessing and prioritizing values is what distinguishes man from beast. The real problem that Dean and his fellow travelers on the left have is not that voters are unaware that they embrace values or morals, but that the ones they do embrace are by and large not the same ones embraced by the majority of American voters.

Part of the reason that Howard Dean's 15-plus minutes of fame have been such a godsend for the Republicans is that unlike the vast majority of Democratic leaders over the last four decades, Dean

is both secure enough in his moral convictions and stupid enough that he will openly declare what his values are. He will say what he believes without even attempting to sugarcoat it with pleasant-sounding euphemisms (e.g. “pro-choice”). In other words, Dean will not only say things like “I hate Republicans,” “the struggle between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party is a struggle between good and evil – and we’re the good,” and Republicans “have never made an honest living in their lives,” but he’ll do so openly, without any semblance of shame or remorse.

And while all of this may well be “red meat” for the left-wing base, it is not likely to help Dean or his party win over any new voters. As the lefty bumper stickers have scolded us all for decades now, “Hate is Not a Family Value.” And those who openly and unashamedly embrace hatred of their fellow Americans are unlikely to find themselves in the political majority anytime soon.

This is not, however, to pin the blame exclusively or even principally on Howard Dean. His national prominence is a relatively recent phenomenon, whereas the Democratic Party’s “values gap” with the American public is not.

It is hard to say whether the Democrats’ values gap is the product of Vietnam and the “disillusionment” so many claim accompanied the war, or if its source lies elsewhere, with Vietnam merely providing the setting for the first full-scale expression of then-newly developed value preferences. I’m not sure that it matters. What matters is that the Vietnam War marked the point at which the values and morals of the American left (liberal Democrats, the preponderance of mainstream journalists, and academia) first became conspicuously distinguishable from those of the American people at large.

For a variety of reasons, the left chose to push its protest of the war beyond mere opposition to its conduct, actively questioning the morality of the exercise of American power and even of war itself. Though it is probably unfair to say that the left as a whole actively sympathized with the enemy, certainly it did not hold the enemy accountable for its

actions “in defense of its country” or for American casualties. Blame was reserved exclusively for the *American* political leaders who ordered the troops in to combat or for the fallen soldiers themselves, who were, in the eyes of the left, stupid, gullible, or hateful and therefore deserving of their fate. By war’s end, many on the left were actually cheering for the other side, believing that an American loss would not only end the hostilities but chasten the nation’s leaders, precluding any future exercise of American military might.

That same moral calculus – with blame for all of the world’s calamities falling on the shoulders of American leaders – continued to predominate on the left throughout the Cold War. The decade of the ‘90s brought some respite from the moral clash between left and right and, not coincidentally, a minor Democratic renaissance. But that respite was short lived, ending shortly after September 11, 2001, when many on the left again embraced morally dubious positions, such as blaming the attacks on American adventurism and arguing that an aggressive response might irritate the perpetrators and make them “hate us even more.”

The subsequent wars in Afghanistan and, more especially, Iraq have reinforced the values gap between the American left, which insists on blaming American leaders, soldiers, and voters for the hostility of radical Islam, and the public at large, which blames the radical Islamists themselves. If anything, the war on terror has almost certainly enlarged the gap between what is viewed as moral by the left and what is viewed as moral by the majority of Americans.

The leftist human rights group Amnesty International called the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay Cuba “the gulag of our time,” labeled the U.S. Secretary of Defense the “high-level architect of torture,” and suggested that foreign governments should consider arresting American officials, including Secretary Rumsfeld, Vice President Cheney, and even President Bush, when they travel abroad and holding them for war crimes prosecution.

But rather than pointing out the ridiculousness of comparing Guantanamo, a small camp at which none of the 750 total prisoners has died and from which prisoners actually leave healthier than when they came in, to the Soviet Gulags, a massive prison camp complex in which some 15 to 30 million people were caged and at which an estimated two to three million died, the American left actually seconded Amnesty's concerns. Even after Amnesty admitted publicly that it has no evidence for its charges and, in fact, has "no idea" what goes on at Guantanamo, several prominent Democrats – including a former President, the Minority Leader in the House, and the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee – joined the chorus of voices condemning the camp and calling for its closure.

Ranking member of the House Ways and Means Committee and one of the longest serving and most recognized Democrats in Congress, Charlie Rangel, appeared on a talk radio show just last week and compared the war in Iraq to the Holocaust. But, rather than condemning Saddam's regime for its slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent Shiites, or for his attempted genocide of the Marsh Arabs, or his torture chambers and mass graves; and rather than cheering the American soldiers as liberators of a long-oppressed people, Rangel actually cast the American government in the role of Hitler's Nazis and American soldiers as the Waffen-SS.

The Iraq war, Rangel insisted, is "the biggest fraud ever committed on the people of this country." It "is just as bad as six million Jews being killed. The whole world knew it and they were quiet about it, because it wasn't their ox that was being gored."

As Australian blogger Arthur Chernkoff noted, what these comments mean is that "in the Rangel moral universe . . . bringing freedom and democracy to millions of Iraqis is as bad as killing six million Jews – both horrible enterprises should have been stopped by the US government but weren't." And given that no one in his party has condemned the comments or even attempted to soften their impact by explaining what the Congressman "meant to say," one can reasonably

conclude that Rangel is hardly the only Democrat to inhabit that twisted moral universe.

These two examples of the Democrats, the mainstream media, and others on the left embracing "moral values" that would hardly be similarly embraced and would, indeed, be deemed offensive by most Americans are but the tip of the proverbial iceberg. While most such examples deal with the war on terror and the war in Iraq, there are other, equally instructive instances that have nothing to do with Iraq. Indeed, even today, Vietnam continues to be a source of moral confusion for the left. Consider the following, penned by Ben Stein and published last week by *The American Spectator*.

If you wanted to see the perfect example of the ethical and moral collapse of the Mainstream Media, you could not do better than a long article in the *New Yorker* of May 23, 2005. The article is entitled, "The Spy Who Loved Us." Written by a teacher at the University of Albany, named Thomas Bass, it's about a man named Pham Xuan An. Now very old, An was -- among many other things -- a correspondent in Saigon during the Vietnam War for *Time* magazine. He was apparently considered a particularly brilliant and well-informed correspondent and very well liked by his colleagues in the Western press corps during the war.

He was also a Communist spy, working for the North Vietnamese, informing them of what he knew about American military plans, troop movements, political agendas.

He even helped the Communists win large battles by directing Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops against American and South Vietnamese forces. He helped plan the Tet Offensive of 1968, including helping the man who planned the attack on the U.S. Embassy. This was the offensive where thousands of innocent civilians were massacred by the Communists.

When the war ended, An offered to go to the U.S. and continue spying for the Communists there. The offer was denied and he lives quietly in Ho Chi Minh City, where, among other pets, he keeps fighting cocks -- a practice generally considered barbaric in the circles of *New Yorker* readers, but another sign of his cuteness to Professor Bass. In fact, the whole article is about how cute and smart and clever and brave a guy An is. A lovable, brilliant, brave man who sent Americans and innocent civilians to their deaths. Bass even explains that almost all of An's former colleagues in the Western press still love the guy after learning he was a spy for America's enemy in the Vietnam War. They even gave money to bring him here for an auld lang syne visit not long ago.

In this article, which I would guess to be about 8,000 words or more, there is not one hint, not one whisper, of sympathy for the American soldiers who fought and died or were maimed in Vietnam. Not one sliver of anger at a man who took American money and helped kill Americans. Not a word about the mass murder of civilians during Tet.

What the American left fails to grasp is that opposition to the war in Vietnam thirty-five years ago or concern about the course of events in Iraq does not necessarily translate into support for the morally debauched Democratic positions. One may therefore worry that the war in Iraq is not going as well as it should without believing that that somehow makes it the equivalent to the slaughter of 12 million men, women, and children. One would have thought that the fact that the American public was overwhelmingly concerned about the course of events in Vietnam thirty-three years ago yet still provided Richard Nixon with the greatest electoral landslide in the nation's history might have taught Democrats that lesson. But apparently it hasn't.

If nothing else, the largely unprecedented midterm election of 2002 and the equally impressive presidential election last fall, attest to the fact that the American left did not learn anything from its previous mistakes. And Democrats' behavior since November suggests that they have still not learned anything.

The Democrats and the media have convinced themselves that the "moral values" that played such a prominent role in that election have nothing whatsoever to do with Iraq or the greater war on terror or with the way in which the left has effectively sympathized with the nation's enemies for the better part of four decades. Instead they make believe that moral values relate only to the ways in which politicians speak about religion or to the issues of abortion and gay marriage.

If I were a Democratic politician, by now I'd be starting to think that I was trapped in some sick, real-life version of the Bill Murray movie "Groundhog Day," where every day is the same and nothing ever changes. If the Democrats want to believe that the Republicans are the ones bound to repeat the mistakes of history, that's their prerogative. But they shouldn't be surprised if they wake up the Wednesday after election day next year, feeling just as they did the Wednesday after election day last year, and the Wednesday after election day two years previous, and the Wednesday after election day two years before that, etc. etc.

The fact of the matter is that Americans know that the Democrats have "moral values." It's just that they don't agree with them. And no amount of hollering and screaming by Howard Dean is going to change that.

A TOUCH OF OPTIMISM ON IRAQ.

In case you haven't read it in the *New York Times*, or heard it on the network news shows, things are moving along reasonably well in Iraq for the Bush administration, both from a strategic and a political standpoint. Now I know that this is a highly subjective observation. But then the doom and gloom on the subject, which is the standard fair among Democrats and members of the mainstream media, is highly subjective too. So, with this understanding in mind, I thought I'd make a case for optimism this week.

Since President Bush's critics are fond of using the Vietnam "quagmire" as a jumping off point for their criticism of the war in Iraq, I'll begin with a few thoughts on that comparison. For starters, it is worthwhile to recall that the antiwar movement during the Vietnam days was united behind a coherent plan of action that had considerable support across the nation and in both political parties. This plan was to "get out," and it included a substantial effort in Congress to make continued funding for the war contingent on the adoption of a genuine exit strategy.

The anti-Vietnam-War effort also devoted considerable energy to making the case that the United States was "on the wrong side" there, that Ho Chi Min was the good guy, a nationalist who wanted nothing more than a Vietnam united under one leader who cared only about "the people," in opposition to the pro-American, "corrupt" leadership of South Vietnam, which cared not a hoot for "the people."

Of course, some members of the current, anti-Iraq-war contingent would favor immediate withdrawal by U.S. troops, and some come very close to favoring the enemy position when they maintain that Arab terrorism is understandable and possibly even justified by President Bush's actions in Iraq and Afghanistan and by America's continued support for Israel's right to exist. But, so far at least, no national political figure has publicly supported immediate withdrawal or openly cheered for the enemy to win.

So they kibitz, complain, issue dire warnings of pending disaster, make personal attacks on the President and other members of his administration, publicly impugn the integrity of the leadership of the U.S. military, wring their hands over the treatment of enemy prisoners, and declare that the war should never have happened in the first place. But they don't demand withdrawal and they don't argue that Saddam was a good guy who was "done wrong."

There is no doubt that their actions hurt the war effort by providing encouragement to the insurgency forces in Iraq, who are well aware that the only hope they have for overthrowing the existing government there and gaining effective control of the country is if the United States loses the will to fight and leaves as it did in Vietnam. But as a practical matter, this carping is not a threat to Bush's long-term war effort since it is not organized and has no discernible goal around which antagonistic Americans can unite. Thus, when the time comes around each year to fund the war, Congress gives President Bush the money to fight on. And from his standpoint, this is where the rubber meets the road, as the saying goes.

From a strategic perspective, this means that America's direct involvement in the war will go on for at least another year, and probably for several more years. This doesn't necessarily mean that everything is going to be hunky-dory over there. But it should give the insurgents cause to worry. Surely, a little moral support from the Democrats in America helps them, especially in their recruiting efforts. But it doesn't do much to alter the reality that safe hiding places from which to continue the insurgency are likely to become increasingly difficult to find as the Iraqi army and police force grow larger and stronger under America's tutelage.

But more importantly, the leaders of the insurgency surely understand that the longer the United States remains in Iraq, the more entrenched the existing government will become; the more comfortable the Iraqi people will become with the freedoms they now enjoy; the more help and support the democratically elected government in Iraq will get from other

countries, as well as from the United Nations; and thus, the more difficult it will be for the insurgency forces to realize their goal of gaining control of Iraq and reasserting tyrannical power there.

There is, of course, no assurance that the government in Iraq will eventually be either truly democratic or friendly to the United States. But it would seem to be a good bet that the prospect of an Iraq run by a rag tag bunch of murderous, religious fanatics and former thugs from the Saddam regime will become increasingly less attractive to an increasingly large number of Iraqis for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that the corruption that is endemic to all Middle Eastern, Muslim states will almost certainly become institutionalized and settle around the new government, eventually seeping down into the ranks of the lesser bureaucrats, the army, the police force, and various private organizations. Corruption is economically inefficient. But, as Saddam so amply demonstrated, when fully implemented in a small nation, it can be powerful glue for holding an existing regime together.

In fact, as the leaders of the new Iraqi government grow comfortable with the perquisites and privileges of running a pro-Western, oil rich state, that is on the receiving end of much largess from the United States, it is likely that they will not only be increasingly unreceptive to influence and advice from either the mad Mullahs in Iran or the thugs in Syria, but possibly be prone to cast a lean and hungry look in their direction.

In short, I believe that the Bush administration has reason to be optimistic that it will be afforded the time and money to establish a government in Iraq that is reasonably friendly to U.S. interests and strong enough not only to withstand the insurgency but to beat it back. This may not occur, of course. But it seems to this subjective optimist that there is every bit as much reason to think that it will occur as there is to expect a less favorable outcome.

On the political front, this is all extremely frustrating to Democrats. Here a Republican administration is in the middle of a war, which is of its own making, very expensive, not particularly popular, not going particularly well, and being fought for a cause that is not all that appealing or understandable to the average American, i.e., “spreading democracy” to the Arab world. And yet, they are unable to reap substantial political gain from it all.

Oh yes, once in a while Democrats can get their teeth into some war-related issue or another, such as prisoner abuse or a new charge that the Bush administration’s justification for the war was fraudulent. But for the most part, such complaints gain little traction except among those who already agree with them. And even when the Democrats do manage to gain a little ground on such an issue, they tend to give it up later when the occasional spurt of good news comes along.

Making matters even more frustrating for them is the fact that the President is a lame duck. He is playing to history, not to politics. His primary, immediate, political concern regarding the war is that he be allowed to pursue it for another three years. If he can bring things under reasonable control during that time, he has a chance of going down in history as a great president, who, through courage and foresight, transformed the Middle East, bringing several totalitarian regimes to their knees and introducing democracy to the Muslim world, which at one time was considered by almost everyone to be innately hostile to the very concept. If he fails, he will be regarded as a failure. It is that simple. Democrats have no real role to play in this drama, unless they choose to openly attempt to assure his failure, which, as I indicated earlier, does not seem likely.

Given this circumstance, a reasonable political strategy on their part might be to enthusiastically and honestly support the war effort. Not only would this make sense from the standpoint of serving the best interests of their country, but it might allow them to reap some residual benefit as a party if things go well,

especially if they carefully reserve the right to blame the President for not having followed all of their well-intentioned advice if things go poorly.

But their bile prevents them from adopting such a strategy, so they are left with the fall back option of endlessly chirping, which provides them with no credit if things go right for Bush and limits the potential for political gain should things go terribly wrong. Certainly, if Bush stumbles badly, they will benefit by simply being there as an alternative to the failed Republican adventure in nation building. But they will not be able to pretend that they had actively proposed or fought for what might have been a more successful plan.

All of this is, as I said in the opening paragraph, an admittedly subjective case for optimism. So with that in mind, I will close with an even more subjective observation concerning the outlook for President Bush's Iraqi war venture, namely that when two distinctly different visions of the world clash on the battlefield of American public opinion, the generous, upbeat, optimistic, can-do vision generally wins the day, whether it makes sense or not.

This has not always been a happy circumstance for conservatives who have found themselves many times in the last 75 years or so grimly defending the status quo against a liberal philosophy of big government cloaked in generous, upbeat, optimistic, can-do rhetoric.

This time around though, the shoe seems to be on the other foot. A conservative Republican President is carrying the generous, upbeat, optimistic, can-do message against a liberal elite that is seeped in reactionary pessimism.

This President says that the United States cannot build a fortress around itself to keep out the terrorists, but must not only go after them in their sanctuaries around the world, but must make significant changes in the governments of these sanctuaries so as to guarantee that they will not turn back into breeding grounds for terrorism once they are cleaned of this pestilence. This President says that people around the world crave freedom and democracy and that it is the responsibility of a great nation like the United States to assist them in their efforts to overthrow tyranny.

The Democrats maintain that this is unwise, that it creates enemies. They applaud, or fail to condemn those who compare U.S. efforts in Iraq to the Nazi holocaust, and American efforts to keep terrorists from plying their trade to the Soviet gulags.

Time will tell whether Bush's vision is a sound one, or malarkey. In the meantime, I would argue that Bush's vision of the world has a better chance on the great battlefield of American public opinion than does the grim, reactionary one advanced by the Democrats. Call it highly subjective optimism, if you will.

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