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THEY SAID IT

The great, overwhelming fact of a capitalist economy is risk. Everyone is at constant risk of losing his job, or having his business destroyed by a competitor, or seeing his investment portfolio crash. Risk makes people circumspect. It disciplines them and teaches them self-control. Government subsidy, by contrast, does for many who are not rich what her millions did for the late socialite Barbara Hutton, it enables them to engage in destructive behavior without immediately suffering the consequences . . .

It really should not surprise anyone that the welfare state has weakened family structures. That was what the welfare state's social programs were meant to do . . .

--Onetime Bush speechwriter David Frum, "It's Big Government Stupid," *Commentary*, June 1994.

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THE WAR ON POVERTY, REDUX.

Now, I know that the mainstream media think that the big, central political conflict of the day involves the war in Iraq and the anti-war protestors who piled into Washington by the tens this weekend to express their displeasure over a wide variety of circumstances, including the fact that a Republican has now won the last two presidential elections. And while I can certainly see the human-interest angle in this story (after all, who knew Joan Baez was still alive?), anyone who thinks that the staged marches and the forty-year-old rants of professional protestors matter one whit is hopelessly confused about this country and how its government actually works.

The fact of the matter is that for roughly two weeks now, the most important debate going on in Washington – the one that will define the nature of the United States for most of the 21st century – is the one taking place between various factions of the Republican Party – or the conservative movement, to be more accurate – over the cost of cleaning up after Hurricane Katrina and the means by which the funds necessary to do so will be obtained.

Naturally, the big-picture political issue involved in this debate is the long-simmering discussion among conservatives about federal spending, which has, by almost any measure, been out of control for the past five years despite the fact that the GOP has controlled all the levers of the federal government throughout that period. The immediate focus of this debate is President Bush's "generous" pledge of nearly a quarter-trillion

dollars to help rescue the city of New Orleans. This pledge will exacerbate greatly the spending splurge and push the budget deficit back up to the \$400 billion range, a circumstance that has caused conservatives of all stripes to ask that the brakes be applied just a little bit and for government to rethink its priorities.

The catch here is that this debate really isn't about spending at all. As I noted in our July 25 issue, all spending debates are really proxy fights over the size and scope of government and its role in the lives of average Americans. And this one is no different. Nary a soul on either side of the current debate is willing to acknowledge this, of course, but when the spending and borrowing decisions are finally made and implemented, this is precisely where the impact on America will be felt.

Last week, after conservatives at various periodicals, web sites, and blogs ratcheted up their criticism of the President and Republican Congressional leaders for out-of-control spending, the administration fought back a bit, arguing that the Katrina-related spending was unfortunate but really couldn't be helped. *National Review Online* posted an email sent by someone described as a "high-level muckety-muck" (the *Wall Street Journal* preferred the term "White House flak") defending the President against criticism leveled that week by various *National Review* contributors and other conservative critics. The White House's defense read, in part:

The reality is that whatever the federal cost of Hurricane Katrina, most of the cost is built in because of statutory commitments (especially the Stafford Act). To put it another way: regardless of who was President – even the most libertarian, small-government conservative – the federal government would be obligated to pay for a huge share of the costs.

Without (hopefully) going into mind-numbing detail, the 1988 Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency

Assistance Act is triggered by a major disaster declaration like Hurricane Katrina. This means that the federal share is required to be at least three-quarters of the reconstruction costs for public infrastructure. In extraordinary circumstances – like Hurricanes Hugo, Iniki, and Andrew, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the terrorist attacks on September 11 – the law commits the federal government to cover between 90 and 100 percent of the cost. This elementary governing fact should cause the few fiscal conservatives who are firing off ill-informed comments to pause long enough to understand that we are meeting legal commitments, not engaged in a "spending spree."

The response to this attempt to placate the troops has actually been to rile the troops up even more. Many have thrown their support behind the efforts of a handful of conservative House members who have launched "Operation Offset," which intends to find budgetary offsets to make Katrina spending affordable. Others have enlisted in efforts to shame spendthrift members of Congress into giving back some of the pork-barrel projects that they and their districts have reaped in recent spending bills, most notably in the recently passed highway bill.

And while all of this is well and good, the narrowness of this discussion actually lets President Bush off the hook too easily, allowing him to debate questions of spending and to look magnanimous by making spending concessions, but never forcing him to defend the more insidious and alarming aspects of his administration's plans to rebuild New Orleans.

To wit, near the end of his speech from Jackson Square, the President told the nation he plans to use the Katrina cleanup money to address the "deep, persistent poverty" that exacerbated the impact of the storm in the New Orleans region, launching what *Slate's* Jacob Weisberg has labeled the "War on Bayou Poverty."

Now, for the record, I have nothing against the “poor” or against attempts to help them. And, in fact, I have no problem with the federal government doing what it can to alleviate some of the burdens of destitution.

That said, the idea that the flaws in American society exposed by Hurricane Katrina mandate a new “war” on anything is not just overkill, but overkill that is both foolish and potentially lethal to the long-term interests of American society. Poverty, like war, is a persistent and immutable human condition that no amount of government tinkering is ever going to eliminate. And this is especially true with the kind of poverty that is most prevalent in the United States today, i.e., poverty that results more from culturally driven choices and attitudes than from a lack of opportunities or governmental programs.

Past efforts by the government to “eliminate poverty” with vast networks of federal programs have proven not only fruitless wastes of enormous sums of money, but damaging to the social fabric as well. Recall that three weeks ago, I argued that one of the principal problems that plagued New Orleans and aggravated the impact of the hurricane was the breakdown of social institutions, most notably the family. And this breakdown in the family is, as researchers as far back as Daniel Patrick Moynihan have suggested, one of the more deleterious unintended consequences of the last war on poverty. What all this means is that Bush is, in effect, promising to cure the ailments created by social engineering with more social engineering. And there’s no telling what new unintended consequences another such “war” might have.

Certainly, it should come as no surprise to anyone that President Bush favors “big government” solutions to problems; after all, it has been better than five years now since we identified then-Governor Bush as a “tax-cut-and-spend Republican,” and at least two years since big-time Washington Republican guru Fred Barnes wrote his paean to Bush and officially christened the President’s strain of Republicanism “Big Government Conservatism.” But the idea

that the President actually believes that the federal government has the ability to eliminate poverty, is shocking, even by “big government conservative” standards.

If the President intended simply to make the case that he and his administration will do their best to ensure that the people of New Orleans come home to find more opportunity than when they left, then he and his speech writers should be more careful the next time to more clearly elucidate their meaning.

But if he did, in fact, mean that he intends to use the power of the federal government to end the type of pervasive intergenerational poverty that afflicts New Orleans – and I believe that is what he meant – then he has opened himself, his party, and their governing ideology up to a number of potentially serious problems.

For starters, in modern, post-industrial societies, the idea of being able to use the government, or any apparatus for that matter, to end a pervasive human condition is supposed to be the exclusive purview of the leftist ideologies. That’s because those ideologies purport to be able to fabricate Utopia, and only in Utopia could fundamental human nature be altered. If President Bush has succumbed to the temptations of power and mistakenly concluded that man does, indeed, have the power to perfect his condition and that the problem with the previous attempts was that they simply didn’t know the right buttons to push, not that they were attempting the impossible, then he is no less Gnostic than the liberals and leftists whom modern conservatives have always decried. And that being the case, the conservatism that had always served to steady society while the left plied its social engineering will have become, in George Bush’s hands, just one more means to “immanentize the Christian eschaton,” as Eric Voegelin so beautifully put it.

You may be right if you think this sounds a bit overwrought and melodramatic. But that doesn’t mean that a conservative “war on poverty” doesn’t carry

serious risks, most notably to American conservatism itself. The list of solutions that President Bush has proposed to alleviate endemic poverty in New Orleans reads like the textbook to “Conservative Governance 101.” Among other things, the President has promised to utilize such free-market approaches to problems as opportunity zones, complete with tax breaks and other incentives to invest; vouchers for education; vouchers for job training; and a homesteading act to encourage ownership of real property.

While I am sure that all (or at least most) of these ideas would yield some benefit to the people of New Orleans and would help create a city that is at least nominally stronger than it was, I am equally sure that they would not end the scourge of poverty in the city – or anywhere else for that matter.

Last week, *Slate*'s Jacob Weisberg wrote an article excoriating his fellow liberals for not working with Republicans to fight poverty as part of the hurricane reconstruction project. Liberals should, he argued, accept President Bush's intentions as genuine and watch and learn from the President's plan of action. He wrote:

Making New Orleans a test site for conservative social policy ideas could shake out any number of ways politically. But all of us have a stake in an experiment that tells us whether conservative anti-poverty ideas, uh, work. If the conservative war on poverty succeeds, even in partial fashion, we will all be better for its success. And if it fails, we will have learned something important about how not to fight poverty.

What Weisberg doesn't say, but which one can infer, is that this “conservative war on poverty” will fail, at least in the pursuit of the ultimate goal, the “elimination” of poverty in the region. And when this failure becomes clear, conservatism and free market governance will suffer accordingly.

Two weeks ago, I argued that President Bush has, throughout his presidency, managed expectations better than his opponents. But with his declaration of war on poverty, that record of careful expectations management has been completely blown. Because President Bush, in his desire to right what went wrong in New Orleans, set the bar impossibly high, any relative success will be seen as ultimate failure and will consequently discredit the approaches employed.

It is worth noting along these lines that the decline of the Democratic Party has followed fairly closely the exposure of the fraudulence of the liberal Utopia. Once it became clear that the programs propagated by the New Deal and the Great Society were, in most cases, vast sinkholes that swallowed tax dollars and not only did not solve the problems they purported to solve, but often made them worse, the ideology that supported those Utopian schemes could no longer survive. Granted, there were at least a half-dozen factors working to undermine the Democratic majority in the late '60s and early '70s. But the utter and complete failure of liberal-left utopianism was surely one of the most significant.

The concern, of course, is that this is precisely the course President Bush is plotting for “conservatism” today.

At the conclusion of his piece last week, Weisberg argued that the GOP may be reluctant to grant the President all that he's requested for his new war on poverty, in large part because “conservatives don't necessarily want their panaceas tried out, for fear their utopia might not be so dreamy after all.” I hope he's right. Not only should conservatives worry that good economic and social policies will be unfairly discredited for failing to achieve impossible ends, but they should be doubly worried about the very idea that their ideas have become “panaceas” promising “utopia.”

THE FOURTH ESTATE AND THE FIFTH COLUMN.

This past weekend, your nation's capital was, according to media reports, the site of the largest anti-war protest since the "invasion of Iraq" more than two years ago and one of the largest protests since the end of the Vietnam War. The occasion for the protest was the arrival of celebrity mourner Cindy Sheehan, whose "Bring Them Home Now" tour arrived in town on Wednesday to stage its own pre-protest protest and to kick off four days of rallies against the policies of the Bush administration. Sheehan, who became a celebrity last month after camping out near the Bush ranch in Crawford, Texas, has sought to portray herself as the vanguard of a movement of ordinary people who have grown tired of the war and want the President to admit his mistakes and bring the troops home.

For the most part, the mainstream media graciously obliged Mrs. Sheehan, portraying the movement as precisely that, a genuine expression of growing anti-war sentiment particularly among average Americans. The following description of the protest and the protestors, which comes from a *Washington Post* report published last Friday, is typical of the treatment the protest "movement" received from the press:

[T]hey [Sheehan and the activists] will be joined by novice protesters such as Patrice Cuddy, 56. Interviewed by phone yesterday, the former public school teacher in Olathe, Kan., said she had to pull off her gardening gloves each time a neighbor interrupted her yardwork to ask about joining the bus she had chartered to go to the nation's capital.

"It's small and it's quiet here in Johnson County, but more and more people are becoming part of the group that doesn't agree with this war," said Cuddy, who was planning to load about 45 people onto the bus in a Home Depot parking lot this morning for the 20-hour ride to Washington.

Organizers say that similar busloads of teachers, nurses, housewives and others with little experience in mass protest are coming from Wisconsin, New Mexico, Illinois, Iowa, Georgia, Ohio and many other states.

"This demonstration will reflect, by far, the most diverse group of antiwar protesters since before the war began," said Brian Becker, national coordinator for the ANSWER Coalition, one of the event's sponsors. "We have people coming from all political persuasions, including a very large number of people who have never before been part of the antiwar movement or protest activity."

Now, there are several problems with this narrative, the most important of which is that it's simply not true. Though protest organizers claimed to have rallied some 200,000 people to their cause and though *The Washington Post* quoted D.C. Police Chief Charles Ramsey as estimating the crowd to be in the 150,000 range, there is reason to believe that such estimates were grossly inflated. For one, District Police no longer give official estimates of protest size, so Ramsey's observations are his own and are based on little more than his personal observations. Additionally, contemporaneous accounts from both the mainstream press and from the conservative media and bloggers suggest that the numbers were actually much smaller than organizers suggested and may have been artificially inflated by including the roughly 70,000 individuals who were also in town and on the mall for the National Book Festival.

More to the point, the idea that this was the spontaneous outpouring of sentiment by average Americans could not be further from the truth. From the start, this was a rally of, by, and for professional protestors, most of whom have been protesting this war since before it began and have been protesting other "injustices" since long before that, though you're unlikely ever to hear or read this in mainstream press accounts.

For starters, there's Mrs. Sheehan's mini-movement, which is a sophisticated, professional operation run by sophisticated protest professionals, media impressions to the contrary notwithstanding. *National Review's* Byron York reported that when the Sheehan Peace Winnebago arrived in Washington last week, even the photographers who showed up to capture the moment on film knew that the whole event was carefully stage-managed. According to York, as Sheehan and her entourage were setting up camp, "a cameraman shooting the scene noticed something. 'I've seen a lot of these people before,' he said. Pointing to a woman a few feet away, he said, 'That one was at the World Bank thing. They're professional protesters.'" York continued:

Indeed, the photographer's observation pointed to something telling about the day. On close examination, the Cindy Sheehan phenomenon appears not to be a mass movement of any sort but rather to consist of a small group of relatives of U.S. servicemen and women — there were perhaps 30 in all with Sheehan on Wednesday — accompanied and guided by a group of full-time organizers like [Lisa] Fithian, [Medea] Benjamin, and the people from Mintwood Media Collective. People like Sheehan and the other Iraq relatives — many of them grieving and angry — don't know how one goes about organizing protests. Fithian and Benjamin do.

As for Fithian, who concedes that she has "been with Sheehan since the first day of the Crawford protest" and who is clearly the top banana in the Bring Them Home world tour, York detailed her history thusly in a story from Crawford last month:

In November 2003, Fithian was profiled by *The New York Times Magazine* as she prepared to take part in protests at the Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting in Miami . . . [S]he claimed that the movement was "nonauthoritarian" and "nonhierarchical" and had no leaders at all — but the *Times*

was not convinced. "To say that Fithian is not a leader is an admirable political idea, but it's not entirely honest," the paper reported.

And she was a tough-minded leader, not at all a peace-and-love type. Her specialty was action; she wanted to break in, cut through fences, and shut things down. "You don't go to Fithian when you want to carry a placard," the *Times* profile said. "You go to her when you want to make sure there are enough bolt cutters to go around." Asked for a fuller explanation of her role in the protests, Fithian said, "When people ask me, 'What do you do?' I say I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change is possible."

That sometimes involves breaking things. In a July 2001 interview with *The International Socialist Review*, Fithian — who told NRO she's been arrested "probably at least 30 times" — spoke of moving beyond the tradition of civil disobedience as practiced by Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr.; her inspiration, she explained, was not so much those leaders as the anarchist movement in Spain in the late 19th and early 20th century. And that meant different ways of doing things. "Nonviolence is a strategy. Civil disobedience is a tactic," Fithian said. "Direct action is a strategy. Throwing rocks is a tactic."

Most media reports on the weekend's events noted that the principal organizer of the protest was a group called International ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), but none saw fit to mention who or what ANSWER actually is. For *The Washington Post* at least, such reportorial laziness is inexcusable. It certainly wouldn't have taken much effort for the reporters and editors working the story for the *Post* to learn a little bit about ANSWER, since they simply could have looked in their own archives for any column on the anti-war movement written by the

late, great Michael Kelly before he was killed while embedded with the troops in Iraq. In March of 2003, in an article detailing another in a long line of “biggest anti-war protests since Vietnam,” Kelly described ANSWER thusly:

International ANSWER . . . is a front group for the communist Workers World Party. The Workers World Party is, literally, a Stalinist organization. It rose out of a split within the old Socialist Workers Party over the Soviet Union’s 1956 invasion of Hungary -- the breakaway Workers World Party was all for the invasion. International ANSWER today unquestioningly supports any despotic regime that lays any claim to socialism, or simply to anti-Americanism. It supported the butchers of Beijing after the slaughter of Tiananmen Square. It supports Saddam Hussein and his Baathist torture-state. It supports the last official Stalinist state, North Korea, in the mass starvation of its citizens. It supported Slobodan Milosevic after the massacre at Srebrenica. It supports the mullahs of Iran, and the narco-gangsters of Colombia and the bus-bombers of Hamas.

Finally, with regard to the “average Americans” who showed up to protest the war, even they were hardly the “novices” the mainstream press would have us believe. For example, Patrice Cuddy, the woman from Kansas singled out by the *Post* above is actually a woman who is also known as J. Patrice Cuddy-Lamoree and who has been active in protesting the war and in organizing protests since before it began. She has edited and posted material at various “alternative” web sites, has encouraged the like-minded to attend protest events, and, according to the bloggers at “Stop the Bleating,” by her own admission, Cuddy “once tried to march in a local St. Patrick’s Day parade as an ‘Elf for Peace,’ carrying ‘PEACE IS GREEN signs decorated with shamrocks.’” Novice, my foot.

Now, it would be nice to dismiss all of this as just one more tired example of blatant, though harmless media bias, but in this case, it’s not entirely clear that it’s particularly harmless.

As we, among countless others, have noted repeatedly since the war in Iraq began, the key to victory will be maintaining support for the effort at home. There is little doubt that the terrorist insurgents can be defeated in Iraq, the only uncertainty is whether the American people will support the effort long enough to allow that defeat to be fully administered. When the media types portray moderate-sized demonstrations populated principally with mercenary protestors as enormous, populist movements driven by the rage of “average Americans,” they make the possibility that the American people will lose heart before the task is complete all the more likely. By creating a mass movement where none truly exists, they create an impression that the nation as a whole has turned against the President and the war and thereby foment the type of despair among the general population that could lead eventually to defeat.

It should be noted as well that the impact of this misimpression about the size and scope of the anti-war movement could, conceivably, affect other actors in the war on terror. In a long, detailed piece on the state of events in Iran, Michael Ledeen noted last week that the Islamic Republic has been encouraged by the appearances of despair among the American people – which it expected, given what happened regarding Vietnam – and has therefore become irrationally emboldened. He wrote:

The [Iranian] regime has been similarly aggressive internationally, threatening to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty if the EU appeasers dared to send the nuclear question to the U.N. Security Council, and, with a frequency and intensity that warrants our attention, threatening to attack the United States. Indeed — obviously believing everything they

read in the *New York Times* or watched on our madstream television — the mullahs celebrated both the damage done by Katrina and the alleged ineptitude of the Bush administration's response. With an America so weak and divided, the mullahs intoned, Iran could wreak devastation on every state . . .

The mullahs are altogether capable of deciding that events are now running strongly in their favor, and that they should strike directly at the United States. They look at us, and they see a deeply divided nation, a president who talked a lot about bringing democratic revolution to Iran and then did nothing to support it, a military that is clearly fighting in Iraq alone, and counting the days until we can say "it's up to the Iraqis now," and — again based on what they see in our popular press — a country that has no stomach for a prolonged campaign against the remaining terror masters in Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

Osama bin Laden came to similar conclusions, and ordered the events of 9/11. Why should the Iranians — who have been major supporters of the terror network ever since the 1979 revolution — not do the same?

Of course, none of this is to say that the media is intentionally undermining the cause of the United States in Iraq or setting the country up for attack. But it is to say that either or both could be the net result of the attempt to portray a professional, mercenary movement as something more than that. Words, like actions, have consequences. And the words used by the mainstream press to describe the protests this weekend were, to put it mildly, misleading. One can only hope that the consequences of those misleading words are nowhere near as dire as they could be.

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