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THEY SAID IT

For those Americans who believed in the creed of old-fashioned, classical, nineteenth-century, liberal individualism, 1945 was especially lonely, unpromising, and bleak. Free markets, private property, limited government, self-reliance, laissez-faire—it had been a long time since principles like these had guided governments and persuaded peoples. The 1930s—what had they been? Uncongenial years of workers' utopias, New Orders, and marching feet abroad; Blue Eagles, the WPA, and increasing regulation of the economy at home . . . Their dejection was sharply reflected in an article written by the historian Mortimer Smith and published three days after the Yalta conference in the year of victory. The “central fact” of the last seventy-five years, he declared, had been the march of men to collectivism; this trend was certain to gain “terrific momentum” from the war . . . No matter what their ideology, said Smith, the leaders of the Grand Alliance agreed on one goal: “enhanced state power” after the war.

--*The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, George H. Nash, 1976, revised edition, 1996.

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WHITHER CONSERVATISM?

I have been reading a lot lately about the great conservative crack up. It seems that each faction within the Republican Party thinks that it is the rightful keeper of the conservative flame and that anyone who does not subscribe to its particular catechism is not just wrong but a heretic bent on destroying the true faith. Indeed, I heard a rumor the other day that Robert Bork had nailed a list of 95 complaints against the Bush administration to the front door of the White House. This may not be true, but I am told that it opened with the following paragraph, which seems to have a familiar ring of legitimacy.

Out of love and concern for the truth, and with the object of eliciting it, the following heads will be the subject of a public discussion at the offices of *The Weekly Standard* in Washington, D.C. under the presidency of the great Justice Robert Bork, one time Solicitor General, Master of Arts and Sacred Judicial Theology, and self appointed Lecturer on these subjects in that place. He requests that whoever cannot be present personally to debate the matter orally will do so in absence in writing.

For what it's worth, my view of the growing schisms within the conservative movement is similar to Erasmus's attitude toward the turmoil that Luther stirred up within the Catholic Church in the early 16th century when he posted his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church.

Having been critical of the Bush administration's particular brand of "compassionate conservatism" from the time that peculiar phrase was first introduced early on in George W's bid for the White House, I applaud those who share my concern about the direction that conservatism has taken under the President's leadership. And as I said a few weeks ago in these pages, I would not be unhappy if Ms. Miers' nomination to the Supreme Court were to fail to win Senate support and President Bush were forced to choose another candidate. On the other hand, like Erasmus, I worry that the incessant squabbling that has of late infected this important and noble fraternity of interests will significantly weaken its effectiveness and thus strengthen the dark forces that are afoot in the land.

Now I know that drawing comparisons between the petty squabbles that are going on within a modern day *political* movement and the historically momentous divisions that ripped into the very core of Christianity five hundred years ago makes for a very tortured analogy. But it's a useful one, as long as one recognizes its limitations. And, it is also kind of fun, so I shall sally forth with the following observation.

Which is that the problems that were facing Christianity in those tumultuous days were a direct result of the enormous success that it had enjoyed in moving from a despised and persecuted religion in danger of extinction to the most powerful and wealthy institution in all of Europe. Not only did this growing power encroach upon the prerogatives of many great rivals, including kings and princes, it spawned hatred and jealousies and directly involved the Church in political, social, and military enterprises that were not conducive to its long-term health as a religious institution.

The problems facing conservatism today are of a similar nature, deriving as they do from its success in growing from a narrowly defined political philosophy with only a small number of adherents at the end of World War II to a broadly based coalition of beliefs and attitudes that combine to make up the central governing principles of the majority political party of the most powerful nation in the world.

In the second half of the 1940s, after the dust had settled on World War II and Americans had turned to the task of building a post-war economy, conservatives found that they were badly out of synch with the times. They were viewed with deep suspicion by the "progressive," majority wing of the Republican Party, which was anxious to shed the party's image of stuffiness and being "behind the times." And they were reviled by Democrats as "reactionaries" who were standing in the way of combining the best aspects of American capitalism with Soviet socialism and in doing so fulfilling the promise brought home by Lincoln Steffens in 1921 when he returned from Soviet Russia and declared "I have seen the future and it works."

Such was the state of conservatism during that time that Lionel Trilling made the following observation in 1950 in his book *The Liberal Imagination*.

In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.

Looking back on this period, conservative publisher Henry Regnery confirmed Trilling's observation as follows:

Liberalism resigned supreme and without question; the Liberal could believe, in fact, that no other position was conceivable. The war, which represented the triumph of good over evil, had been won. Fascism, militarism and colonialism had been banished from the earth; the Peace-Loving Nations, joined together in San Francisco in a perpetual bond, would preserve peace, protect the weak, and guarantee the rule of democracy – the future seemed assured. It was a beautiful picture and questions about its conformity to the facts of life were not welcome.

As with the early Christians in Rome, as described in the Epistle to Diognetus, there was in those days none of the dissention and rancor among the ranks of conservatives that exists among their successors today. Not only was there sufficient criticism directed against them from outside their circle to discourage them from quarreling among themselves, but they were united in their reverence for the wisdom of Edmund Burke and in their fear and loathing of socialism and communism.

Among other things, they were in full agreement that Burke was correct when he said that the future should be built upon past experience, that a nation's customs and traditions are more reliable as a guide for action than the fads and fashions of the day. As such, they were deeply skeptical about political schemes, such as socialism and communism, that purported to be capable of reforming mankind and creating a “worker's paradise” on earth. And they were intensely concerned about liberal efforts to undermine the fundamental tenets of traditional American society, from its Judeo-Christian belief in a just and personal God to the importance of private property. Burke believed that both of these were crucial to insuring freedom.

These conservatives were scorned, derided, and ridiculed but they held to their beliefs and tenaciously fought back against what they considered to be the dangerous notions of the leftist establishment. They wrote books and articles in scholastic journals. They

started magazines and taught in Universities. Each in his own way proselytized the conservatism of Burke, broadcast his fear and loathing of socialism and communism, and along the way, added his own ideas and beliefs to the conservative canon. Heroes of this period included such men as Richard Weaver (*Ideas Have Consequences*), Bill Buckley (*God and Man at Yale*), Whittaker Chambers (*Witness*), Russell Kirk (*The Conservative Mind*), Robert Nisbet (*Quest for Community*), and Peter Viereck (*The Unadjusted Man*).

During the next 20 years, progress was slow but steady. By the mid-1960s, conservatism had become a significant factor in the Republican Party, enough so that Barry Goldwater was able to beat out Nelson Rockefeller as the party's presidential candidate. But the GOP was a still very much the nation's minority party, and the conservative wing of the GOP was particularly weak nationally. Proof of this was demonstrated in the overwhelming victory that Lyndon Johnson achieved over Goldwater in the 1964 presidential race.

It is worth noting that conservatives at the time were still very much united behind their traditional beliefs and concerns. By that time, they included in their ranks the small but dedicated band of libertarians, who were largely uninterested in the Burkean side of traditional conservatism but were devoted anti-communists, staunch opponents of big government, and dedicated free market capitalists, so the marriage went off virtually without a hitch.

Ironically, the stage was set for the rise of conservatism to the governing philosophy of the majority party of the world's most powerful nation during the early days of the Johnson administration when the Democratic Party was hijacked by radical left-wing activists, who were imbued with a seemingly endless variety of crackpot social engineering schemes, a genuine hatred for the United States, and an abiding hostility to both national defense and law and order. George Nash describes the phenomenon that resulted from this radical left wing take over of the Democratic Party in his marvelous book, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, as the “rightward migration of disillusioned liberals.”

The first of these liberal migrations to the conservative cause took place in the 1970s and 1980s. The newcomers were initially described as right-wing liberals, but they have subsequently come to be called “neo-conservatives.” Irving Kristol, a prominent intellectual leader of this movement, described neo-conservatives as a “liberals who had been mugged by reality.” As former liberals, they were different from the old line conservatives with whom they joined in an often uneasy alliance, in that they were quite favorably disposed to government action in response to social ills, so long as a “conservative” was directing the project. As such, they did not share the traditional conservative’s concern about increases in either the size or the influence of federal government. They shared the traditional conservative loathing of communism and socialism, but were more inclined than traditional conservatives toward an aggressive military response to America’s enemies. And they had a far greater faith in what might be described today as “nation building.” Nash describes them as follows:

In part the neoconservative phenomenon could be interpreted as a recognition that good intentions alone do not guarantee good governmental policy, and that the actual consequences of liberal social activism in the 1960s and the 1970s had been devastating. Neoconservatism was also a reaction of moderate liberals to the polarizing upheavals of the 1960s (particularly on the campuses) and to the shattering rise of the New Left, with its tendency to blame America first for world tension and its hostility to an American military presence abroad. Many neoconservatives, in fact, had been anti-Communist, “vital center” liberals of the Harry Truman-Hubert Humphrey wing of the Democratic Party who found themselves bereft of a political home after the capture of their party by the followers of Senator George McGovern in 1972.

The second great migration to the conservative cause came during the 1980s and 1990s. These individuals were initially described collectively as the “New Right,” but are more commonly referred to today as the “religious right.” Nash describes them as follows.

It was rather a grassroots movement of protest by aroused citizens, many of them Protestant fundamentalists, evangelicals, and pentacostals, with some Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews as well. While New Right leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson generally shared the foreign policy and economic perspectives of other conservatives, their guiding preoccupations lay elsewhere, in what became known as the “social issues”: abortion, school prayer, pornography, drug use, crime, sexual deviancy, the vulgarization of mass entertainment, and more. Convinced that American society was in a state of vertiginous moral decline, and that secular humanism – in other words, modern liberalism—was the fundamental cause of this decay, the New Right exhorted its hitherto politically quiescent followers to enter the public arena in defense of traditional moral values.

Needless to say this inflow into the conservative camp of former liberals and hitherto politically unengaged Christians, as a direct result of the increasing radicalization of the Democratic Party, has been viewed as a welcome development by a majority of conservatives. Certainly, the Republican Party, and therefore the conservative movement, would not have achieved the successes of the past several decades had this migration not occurred.

But it should come as no surprise that this type of growth brought with it some problems. Large and enormously successful political coalitions of diverse interests and concerns are assured of having more internal squabbles than small organizations made up of individuals with verisimilar beliefs and goals.

Is the conservative coalition poorer for having lost the fraternal joy of being a small and despised political minority held together by a mutual dedication to unpopular beliefs? Is the Democratic Party better off now that the “big tent” created by Franklin Roosevelt has been replaced by a small group of wacko lefties who can’t see beyond their shared hatred for President Bush and their collective terror at the thought of losing the right to abortion on demand?

Is the Republican Party destined to go into a tailspin as the Democratic Party did when it reached its apex of power under the leadership of Lyndon Johnson? Is conservatism about to break apart as Christianity did in the 16th century when it became too powerful? I don’t think so, at least not any time soon. Robert Bork is no Luther. Nor is Bill Kristol or George Will. And President Bush is no Lyndon Johnson. The strains that are evident within the conservative coalition today are normal to a majority party during tumultuous times.

The Miers nomination was a mistake. The outcry over it could have been avoided if President Bush were more skilled at governing a large coalition of diverse interests. Ronald Reagan was good at it and would almost certainly not have made such a mistake. Nor would Franklin Roosevelt, who was a master at holding together a party made up of widely different beliefs and concerns. But President Bush will get it right eventually and things will settle down. He isn’t particularly good at coalition management. But he is good enough to hold it together for the next three years.

The long-term future of the conservative coalition depends on the kind of leadership that Republicans and Democrats embrace in the post-Bush world. Certainly, if Republicans can find a leader who is skilled at internal party diplomacy, the conservative coalition has a good chance of enjoying a long and politically happy future. This future would be virtually assured if the Democratic Party remains nothing more than a haven for reactionary leftists, and as such, a hostile environment for disaffected elements of the conservative coalition. On the other hand,

if the Democrats can find a leader who is capable of reestablishing the party as a more centrist and moderate force, there is a distinct possibility that some of the more liberally inclined “conservatives” in the Republican Party could find it attractive once again.

Obviously, there are too many variables in this equation to feel comfortable making a long-term prediction. In the short term, however, I would venture to answer the question posed above, “Whither Conservatism?” with the statement, “onward and upward, with cutbacks, falls, scrapes and scratches along the way, but onward and upward nevertheless.”

CONSERVATISM CRACKS UP . . . AGAIN.

Over the next several weeks, months, and even years, we can all expect to read (or at least to see) scores of articles and books about the collapse of the grand conservative coalition and the imminent fall from power of the Republican Party. Most of these will focus on how George W. Bush was/is not really a conservative and thereby served to exacerbate the ultimately irreconcilable differences between the movement’s various factions and how he eventually destroyed Reagan’s “Big Tent.”

Though the events of the last several weeks certainly make the preoccupation with this story line understandable, I would suggest keeping a few caveats in mind as you try to determine which stories do (e.g. Mark’s piece above) and which stories do not (everything else I’ve read to this point) offer actual, practical insights into the problems facing the conservative movement and the Republican Party.

For starters, the “conservative crack-up” genre of political analysis is almost as old as conservatism itself, and most of those who will address this issue will be of the same ilk as the hypersensitive and frantic economists who have made their reputations by

“predicting ten of the last three recessions.” To hear these folks tell it, the “big story” in American politics is the perpetually imminent collapse of the GOP. Six months ago – which was the last time the coalition was collapsing – I quoted the inimitable Mark Steyn, who noted the tediousness of this storyline with his usual aplomb. To wit:

Blog maestro Andrew Sullivan decided that America was witnessing a “conservative crack-up” over Terri Schiavo and the embrace of her cause by extreme right wing fundamentalist theocrat zealots like, er, Jesse Jackson and Ralph Nader. Sullivan was last predicting a “conservative crack-up” during the impeachment era, on the grounds (if I recall correctly) that Republican moralizing would dramatically cut into Strom Thurmond’s share of the gay vote. In the ‘90s, the *Weekly Standard* ran innumerable special editions devoted to the subject: Conservative Crack-Up; Conservative Crack-Up 2; Conservative Crack-Up - The Musical; Abbott And Costello Meet The Conservative Crack-Up; Conservative Crack-Up On Elm Street; Four Weddings And A Conservative Crack-Up; Rod Stewart Sings Timeless Favorites From The Great Conservative Crack-Up, etc.

A second factor to keep in mind while reading these stories is the fact that most of the “analysis” involved will be tainted, either by ideological bias or a lack of knowledge about and understanding of the subject matter. In the first case, such disparate commentators as Pat Buchanan and Bill Kristol (and dozens of others in between) will deign to explain what “real” conservatism is and how it will reassert itself over the next few years, but will never acknowledge, either to themselves or their readers, how their analysis is affected by the fact that they have a dog in the race. Each will describe the future of conservatism, and, strangely enough, each will describe a future that looks startlingly like the type of conservatism he believes in and advocates, be it “national greatness” conservatism,

good old-fashioned reactionary conservatism, free-market libertarianism, religious conservatism, or something different entirely.

In the second case, despite the recent spate of hand-wringing articles by unhappy conservatives, most of the stories about the great crack-up will be written by liberals, many of whom work for mainstream media organizations and the overwhelming preponderance of whom have exceptionally little first-hand knowledge of the battles within conservatism or, more to the point, what it is most conservatives want from their party and its leaders.

A classic example of the types of mistakes and misunderstandings that can arise from a non-conservative trying to explain what is happening within the movement and how this “reformation” will play out can be found in an otherwise excellent piece penned by *The New Republic’s* Associate Editor Ryan Lizza and published in *TNR* last week. Though Lizza’s piece is well researched and well written, it suffers from the classic failing of such anthropological examinations of conservatism. In other words, Lizza merely transposes his own beliefs and expectations into a conservative context and then predicts what he would do in such a circumstance, all of which leads him to draw rather misleading conclusions. For example, he writes:

There are two strains of reform conservatism bubbling in GOP circles. They look nothing like each other, but either one might find fertile ground if the Republican status quo is truly upended.

The brand of reform that is most clearly ascendant is John McCain’s. “Chaos is our friend” is a saying often used by McCain advisers, and they are right . . . Conservative disillusionment with Bush is giving McCain a second chance with parts of the base that previously shunned him--a chance he’s well-positioned to exploit. Even before the Miers split, he alone in the GOP carried the

mantle of fiscal restraint. He voted against Bush's Medicare and highway bills and has now joined hands with conservatives in the House to try to cut spending. Meanwhile, McCain's allies have been quietly reaching out to social conservatives. They hold regular conference calls with Republican leaders in South Carolina, the senator's Waterloo in 2000. McCain (shamefully) has even endorsed the teaching of "intelligent design" in schools . . .

Not only is McCain taking advantage of the ideological fissures on the right, but he is one of the few Republicans who could actually benefit from the scandals threatening to bring down his party. The McCainiacs have been the loudest voices in GOP politics decrying the Jack Abramoff-style corruption that has infested Washington. (McCain himself, to the chagrin of many conservatives, is leading the Senate investigation of Abramoff.) If the Bush collapse is accompanied by major Republican defeats in 2006 ("How sobering will that be to the party?" says a McCain adviser), McCain is poised to be the chief beneficiary on the right.

Only someone from outside the conservative movement could actually believe that John McCain is poised to take over as the movement's leader and, more importantly, that his disdain for the First Amendment (which he calls "campaign finance reform") would be an advantage for him in his attempt to seize power. This is not to say that McCain can't be the Republican nominee in 2008. I think that unlikely but not impossible. But even if he is the clear undisputed frontrunner and wins the nomination handily, he will never, ever be a conservative, much less the leader of the movement.

Though he may favor balanced budgets and may, in fact, have picked up some conservative support over the past couple of months with his adamant opposition to pork-barrel spending, McCain is hardly

a friend of small government and will never be confused for one by movement conservatives. Indeed, as his campaign finance boondoggle demonstrates, the Senator actually has a rather disconcerting fondness for the type of large, overweening government regulatory regimes that drive conservatives crazy, favoring nanny-state approaches to issues ranging from free speech to energy consumption (i.e. "global warming").

McCain also opposed the Bush tax cuts in the name of "fiscal responsibility," thereby demonstrating a lack of understanding of what has become the fiscal and economic bedrock of the movement, and he is, as Lizza concedes, a latecomer to the culture wars. In short, then, he is the kind of "conservative" only a liberal could love, which, of course, is why they love him so.

If John McCain is the Republican nominee in '08, it will be because the War on Terror is still an extremely relevant political concern and because national security is the preeminent issue of the day. McCain may well be a Republican President (though, as I said, I doubt it), but if so, he will be a caretaker, elected in spite of his lack of conservative *bona fides*, not because of them.

Lizza, like any good political analyst, sees what is going on within the conservative movement and attempts to explain it and divine the movement's future. But like any liberal, he predicts a future that would be most pleasing to liberals. It's not that he doesn't have some interesting insights or make some valid points, it is just that he doesn't "get" conservatism, and his predictive capabilities are therefore limited. This is, of course, hardly a novel observation on my part, having been made dozens of times by dozens of different conservatives. But it is one that is worth remembering, I believe, when "the press" begins to explain where conservatism is going and what it will look like when it gets there.

One final point that I think is worth keeping in mind as this debate rages is that no one – conservative, liberal, or otherwise – understands at all times what

President Bush is doing and how he intends to advance conservative causes. Moreover, no one knows when he will do so unwittingly.

I mention this chiefly because there is near uniformity across the spectrum of conservative criticism that the 2002 Farm Bill signed by President Bush is one of the principal indictments against him and constitutes prime evidence that he is not a *real* conservative. This is all well and good, and I certainly understand why most conservatives would find this farm bill particularly offensive. After all, the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 is not merely rich with subsidies, many of which go to large agribusinesses (like Archer Daniels Midland), but it also reinvigorated many of the subsidy programs, that conservatives believed they had begun to kill off with the 1996 farm bill. That bill, the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act, a.k.a. “The Freedom to Farm” Act was long considered one of the crowning achievements of the first Republican Congress in over half-a-century.

There are, in my estimation, a couple of major problems with this universal animosity to Bush over the farm bill. First, it is unfair, given that the reported increase in federal agriculture subsidy payments in the 2002 bill as compared to its predecessor has been greatly exaggerated by simply ignoring the costs of the “emergency supplemental” bills that were annual “necessities” under Freedom to Farm. Second, and more importantly, the animosity is dependent on overlooking the fact that the 2002 bill has the potential to play an enormous role in the liberalization of global trade and global markets, something for which conservatives should wholeheartedly cheer, irrespective of the temporary compromises that were necessary in the pursuit of such historic ends.

You see, as things stand today, the World Trade Organization’s Doha Round negotiations are stalled, in large part because the French government (and by extension the rest of Europe) is unwilling to agree to a sharp decrease in agriculture subsidies and a related sharp decrease in (and eventual elimination of) tariffs on agricultural products. While this might seem like a

bad thing, in reality, it represents significant progress. The French are in this predicament because the United States Trade Representative Bob Portman was able to make a significant, unprecedented, sweeping offer on the part of the United States to reduce its trade-distorting “amber box” subsidies by some 60% if the EU will reduce its (even larger) subsidies by 75%.

The deal proposed by the United States would almost certainly be enormously beneficial to, among others, American farmers, who would gain access to new markets, including Europe, and the world’s poorest nations, which would actually be given an opportunity to use the global markets to relieve poverty and build solid, trade-based economies. And such a proposal would never have been possible if the United States didn’t have some chips with which to bargain. If, for example, President Bush had vetoed the farm bill as so many conservatives say they wanted, and if he had pushed for further reductions in ag. subsidies, again as conservatives wanted, then USTR Portman would have had nothing to offer in return for the reduction in EU subsidies, which are far more distorting to trade than American subsidies, and such a deal to advance the global trade agenda would never have been even remotely possible.

The trade deal may not get done, of course, and, indeed, the French appear to be digging in their heels and refusing to budge on the subsidy question. But at the same time, the United States made a significant and, frankly, courageous offer, thereby enhancing its free-trading credentials and, as the *Wall Street Journal’s* editorial board put it, blowing the “cover off” the EU, which has long manipulated the global markets to support its agriculture welfare state. Merely making the proposal is a significant step in the right (as in “conservative”) direction on global trade.

Now, the counter to this argument is that President Bush couldn’t possibly have planned to use these subsidies as trade bait three years ago and therefore couldn’t have had such a “conservative” end in mind when he signed the bill. This is both beside the point and not necessarily true.

Certainly the bill's authors, most notably then-House Agriculture Committee Chairman, Republican Larry Combest, didn't write the bill with the intention of using its farm "support programs" as bargaining chips in the global trade debate. And acquiring such chips was probably not the Bush administration's primary reason for signing the bill either. That said, I don't doubt that such thoughts did figure into the administration's calculations. Indeed, having covered both ag. policy during the Farm Bill debate and trade policy during earlier sessions of the Doha trade negotiations in my previous incarnation at Lehman Brothers, I believe the Bush administration was well aware of the potential to use the newly augmented farm subsidies as chips in trade negotiations from the very start and intended, at some level, to advance its free trade agenda by negotiating away much of what its conservatives critics so detest about the farm bill.

In any case, whether the Bush administration had any idea things would turn out this way is irrelevant. The fact of the matter is that the President is now pushing to expand global markets tremendously and, in the process, to diminish the much-hated farm subsidies. Conservatives can complain all they want about the Farm Bill and declare that Bush sold them out by signing it, and they may be right. But if he is able to pull this trade deal off, the President may well be remembered more for his vision and leadership on free trade than on any other issue, including foreign policy. And, as I said above, that's something conservatives of all stripes should cheer enthusiastically.

All of this is not to say that no one should criticize the President or discuss how he's affected the conservative movement and its future. All of that is to be expected, and some critiques and forecasts will almost certainly be incredibly insightful and illuminating. That said, it is important to read these forecasts and harangues with the knowledge that most are not going to be particularly good or particularly useful.

WE'RE STILL WINNING.

For months now, we, like countless thousands of other Americans, have wondered aloud why President Bush and his advisors appeared to be laboring in denial about the role that Iraq's hostile neighbors, Syria and Iran, are playing in that nation's deadly "insurgency." The interference of these two and their rabidly anti-American, anti-Semitic, totalitarian regimes in the Iraq war is undeniable and exceptionally damaging, with both providing the terrorists with supplies, reinforcements, and sanctuary. Yet President Bush has always appeared unwilling either to address this problem or even to acknowledge it publicly, preferring to chide both regimes occasionally but never to speak the truth and accuse them openly of aiding and abetting our enemies.

To be fair, we suspected President Bush had a plan and would, at some point, make that plan known. Mark predicted the following regarding the Bush strategy on Syria and Iran in his annual forecast piece last January:

I now think that Syria may be the first to feel the pressure, which will begin with diplomatic niceties but could, in a relatively short time, include air strikes on and inside the borders of either or both nations

As for timing, I expect that shortly after the election in Iraq is completed, the new provisional government will formally ask the U.N. Security Council to demand that Syria and Iran stop supporting the insurgency movement against the legitimate government of Iraq, and formally ask the United States to join in Iraqi military efforts to protect the nation against infiltration of terrorists from Iran and Syria. It is at this point that, as per my above prediction, the geopolitical temperature in the region will begin to rise and things will begin to get more complicated and more dangerous.

It is worth noting here that Bush will have the moral high ground on this confrontation, given that the Iraqi people

will, *with the formal help of the United Nations*, have elected the government there and Syria and Iran will stand accused of aiding and abetting an illegal assault against this sovereign government.

Now, we were, obviously, wrong about the timing of the diplomatic/military assault against Syria and were wrong about the justification that would be given for it. But our mistake was simply that we underestimated the downright thugishness and stupidity of the Syrian Baathists and didn't realize that the regime itself would provide the justification for bringing the UN into the matter *on our side* and sealing its own unpleasant fate. In other words, for the last several months, while we have fretted that the President hadn't done things exactly as we would have, he was, in all likelihood merely biding his time, waiting for the UN report on the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri to come out and to implicate the Syrian regime, thereby legitimating aggressive retaliatory actions against Bashar Assad and his Baathist goons.

As things worked out, President Bush couldn't have asked for a stronger hand to be dealt to him by the buffoon tag team of Assad and Kofi Annan, who together have actually given him far more moral authority in this matter than even he could have hoped. Not only did the UN's Mehlis report on the Hariri assassination implicate the Syrian regime and several high-ranking officials therein, but it now appears that the original version of the report was even more damaging and implicated Assad's close family members and was sloppily redacted by Annan and his own band of thugs at the UN in an apparent attempt to shield Assad from the full consequences of his actions. In a plot twist that will almost certainly spawn conspiracy theories asserting that Bill Gates is a Zionist agent, it turns out that the UN version of the report was released last week as a Microsoft Word document that allowed changes to be tracked. This morning, *The Times* (London) reported thusly:

The United Nations withheld some of the most damaging allegations against Syria in its report on the murder of Rafik Hariri, the

former Lebanese Prime Minister, it emerged yesterday. The names of the brother of Bashar al-Assad, President of Syria, and other members of his inner circle, were dropped from the report that was sent to the Security Council.

The confidential changes were revealed by an extraordinary computer gaffe because an electronic version distributed by UN officials on Thursday night allowed recipients to track editing changes. The mistaken release of the unedited report added further support to the published conclusion that Syria was behind Mr Hariri's assassination in a bomb blast on Valentine's Day in Beirut. The murder of Mr Hariri touched off an international outcry and hastened Syria's departure from Lebanon in April after a 29-year pervasive military presence . . .

The deleted names represent the inner core of the Syrian regime. Maher al-Assad, President al-Assad's younger brother, is a lieutenant-colonel and head of the Presidential Guard. He is known for his quick temper and six years ago was said to have shot his brother-in-law, General Assef Shawkat, in the stomach during an altercation.

General Shawkat, also among the deleted names, is married to President al-Assad's headstrong sister, Bushra, and was appointed commander of Syrian military intelligence on February 14 this year, the day Mr Hariri was murdered. General Shawkat's predecessor at Military Intelligence was General Hassan Khalil, the third name on the deleted list.

General Bahjat Suleyman, the fourth Syrian on the list, was until June the head of the internal affairs section of the powerful General Security Department, the main civilian intelligence service.

This report, coupled with another UN report due out this week that will, according to Reuters, accuse the Assad regime of continuing “to arm proxy guerrillas and run spies in Lebanon despite withdrawing its troops from the country in April,” will almost certainly make some sort of UN action against the Assad regime inevitable. Already President Bush has made known his intention to have the Security Council convene “as quickly as possible to deal with this very serious matter,” and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has declared that the Security Council “will have no real credibility if it does not take seriously the implications of this report.”

What all this means is that President Bush is going to get to take the strong action against Syria that we and others have long believed is both necessary and justified and is going to get to do so with the help of other nations and with the blessing of the international community. As things look right now, the “plan” for dealing with Syria simply couldn’t have played out any more seamlessly.

Conventional wisdom holds that President Bush must tread carefully here, given that the Assad regime is weak and its collapse may lead to a takeover of Syria by radical Islamists. And while that certainly is a consideration the President and his team will keep in mind, one thing Bush appears to have learned better than most of those fashioning the conventional

wisdom is that we, as a nation, get into trouble when we worry excessively about “stability” and the fate of murderous totalitarians. Though the alternatives to Assad may not be too terribly appealing, that doesn’t mean that Assad should or will be propped up.

It should, of course, be noted in conclusion that whatever happens in Syria, the Bush doctrine continues to rack up largely unheralded victories. For the record, that means that in less than four years, two totalitarian regimes (Afghanistan and Iraq) have been replaced by nascent democracies, one other totalitarian rogue regime (Libya) has given up its nuclear ambitions and decided to try to rejoin the global community, one semi-totalitarian regime (Egypt) has held its freest elections ever, one former client state of a totalitarian regime (Lebanon) appears poised to reclaim its semi-democratic heritage, and one more totalitarian regime (Syria) is now an official global pariah and may soon fall under the weight of its own stupidity.

All things considered, then, thus far it’s been fairly productive quagmire.

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