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THEY SAID IT

In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear in the Middle East and indeed all over the lands of Islam that things had indeed gone badly wrong. Compared with its millennial rival, Christendom, the world of Islam had become poor, weak, and ignorant . . .

There was worse to come. It was bad enough for Muslims to feel weak and poor after centuries of being rich and strong, to lose the leadership that they had come to regard as their right, and to be reduced to the role of followers of the West. The twentieth century, particularly the second half, brought further humiliation - the awareness that they were no longer even the first among the followers, but were falling ever further back in the lengthening line of eager and more successful Westernizers, notably in East Asia. The rise of Japan . . .

The question "Who did this to us?" has led only to neurotic fantasies and conspiracy theories . . . If the peoples of the Middle East continue on their present path, the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region, and there will be no escape from a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression, culminating sooner or later in yet another alien domination . . .

--Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?*, 2002.

WAR ON SENSELESS VIOLENCE.

I have never doubted that militant Islam will lose the struggle it is waging. It is a loser's venture on two important levels. First, as I have noted numerous times in these pages, it is culturally and ideologically way out of touch with the times. I made this point last summer, as follows.

Ultimately . . . militant Islam . . . will find that its promise of life in a medieval society under a legal system presided over by a band of uneducated, religious fanatics is not easy to peddle in a world where one of the most glaring trends of the age is a demand for freedom and access to the global consumer market. And this is especially true, when the sales technique of choice is the ultimate "hard sell," i.e., killing people who won't buy.

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Second is the fact that the movement's leaders are so tactically inept that it is difficult to believe that there is or ever has been a logical blueprint for achieving concrete ends. In fact, as time goes on, it seems increasingly apparent that suicide attacks are not just a tactic employed by the Islamist leaders in the greater war against the West, but that the entire venture is simply one giant suicide attack.

Consider for a moment the September 11 assaults. They were terrible. Devastating. Many experts on terrorism were extremely concerned that they were the harbinger of even worse attacks in the near future. A very real concern was that the U.S. economy could be brought to its knees by any one or a number of follow-up actions, including, but not limited to the downing of one or more commercial airlines with hand held missiles or bombs in the cargo holds, the destruction of one or a few of the nation's most important bridges, suicide attacks in several malls at Christmas time, the deliberate spreading of a biological agent into a population center or even into the nation's cattle or chicken production facilities. And the list went on and on.

But nothing happened. There was no follow up attack. And as far as anyone can tell, no serious planning for a series of devastating follow up attacks had ever taken place. You hit the biggest, meanest guy in the bar over the head with a beer bottle for making lewd remarks to your girlfriend and you turn away and walk slowly back to your table. Dumb! Very dumb!

Not only was that dumb on the part of Osama bin Laden, but his apparent belief that he could hide in a cave in Afghanistan until American anger blew over and then resume his nefarious activities from his perch in that little country was even dumber. "Know thine enemy" is the starting point for all tactical planning. Osama apparently still believed that his enemy was Bill Clinton, who responded to the attacks on the American embassies in Africa by bombing an aspirin factory in Sudan and some recently vacated training camps in Afghanistan. Osama apparently had no clue that George Bush might react differently than Bill, or

that the American people might respond differently to an attack on their home soil than they did to bombings in Africa. Dumb! Very dumb!

So, in exchange for one big cheap shot against the evil Satan, Osama lost his comfortable little hidey-hole in Afghanistan and totally screwed up the network that radical Islam had been building for years within the United States, which was not only raising millions of dollars annually on behalf of the effort to destroy Israel but was arguably building a highly effective fifth column that could have been exceedingly useful in helping to launch a series of coordinated strikes that truly would have damaged the U.S. economy, had someone in the Islamist camp thought of it.

Anyone who doubts that the 9/11 attacks were harmful to militant Islam's long-term goal of crippling the United States need only consider the fate of South Florida Professor Sami al-Arian, who is standing trial right now in Florida on charges of being the leader of Islamic Jihad's U.S. operations, and Abdul Rahman al-Amoudi, a well-known founder of the American Muslim Council, who is presently in a U.S. prison, having been caught up in a broad, post-9/11 investigation of Muslim charities that support terrorism abroad. I addressed this subject in these pages almost two years ago as follows.

Prior to that [9/11], militant Islam was raising vast amounts of money in the United States and making significant inroads into both the cultural and political power structure of the nation. Leaders of the movement had become accustomed to White House invitations, and had no trouble getting known terrorists in and out of the country to give fiery speeches to conferences at which phrases like "Kill the Jews" and "Kill Steve Emerson" inflamed Muslim audiences from coast to coast.

At that time, the opposition consisted of a few private citizens like Emerson and a few hardliners in the CIA and the FBI, none

of whom was very successful in promoting the belief that militant Islam was a growing threat to the nation, even in the aftermath of the first World Trade Center bombing. Today, as a direct result of 9/11 there is a cabinet level agency dedicated to Homeland Security, dozens of “experts” on terrorism talking daily of “the threat,” and a nation that is frightened and angry at Muslims of all stripes and anxious to do anything possible to see that the threat of terrorism is diminished, even if the tradeoff between liberty and security must once again be shifted dramatically.

Of course, Bush’s critics argue that his conduct of the war against Osama bin Laden and Islamic terrorism has been marked by one mistake after another. And there is no question that mistakes have been made. But this does not negate the fact that aside from killing a lot of people, the Islamists do not appear to be making a great deal of headway toward their professed goals of restoring the Caliphate, driving Western culture and influence from the Middle East, and destroying the United States and Israel. In fact, as Steve pointed out several weeks ago, they seem to have suffered some significant setbacks at President Bush’s hands since the battle began. He put it this way.

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 a fairly productive quagmire.

Now many of Bush’s critics may claim that these events are pyrrhic victories, or costly mistakes, or malign efforts to unseat the rightful rulers of sovereign nations, or a return of Western imperialism. But however they are viewed or described by some Americans, from the perspective of the Islamists themselves, it would seem to be difficult to consider them as anything but setbacks in two of the most critical areas of traditional guerrilla warfare, as conceived by one of its most successful practitioners, Mao Tse-tung. The first is keeping the people around them friendly and supportive (“Guerrillas are like fish, and the people are the water in which fish swim.”) and the second is gaining and keeping territory from which to conduct a long-term fight, since the people around them can’t be counted upon to stay friendly and supportive forever (Mao eventually took control of the water around him, or to be more precise, all of China.).

And this brings up what may have been the grandest displays of tactical stupidity on the part of the Islamists since the opening of hostilities, namely the recent suicide bombings in Jordan and the riots in France.

I mean, what could the al Qaeda geniuses possibly have expected to gain from killing 57 innocent, civilian Arabs in Jordan? Now, Jordan may not have been to militant Islam what the happy haven of Switzerland was to Nazis in World War II. But until the other day at least, it was a relatively safe place for the agents of militant Islam to hang out, trade gossip and intelligence with people who had contacts with the Western enemy, launder money, hide money, collect money, work the black market, recruit warriors, enjoy the ambiance of a peaceful nation next door to the battlefield, and cut deals with people who have similar views and goals, all without being too badly harassed by the local gendarme.

So one day the mastermind Al-Zarqawi sends a “group of our best lions” to blow themselves up in the midst of two wedding parties that had nothing whatsoever to do with anything, and in the process makes virtually every Jordanian furious at him and his cause.

Lions? Sneaking into a wedding party and committing suicide? Nonsense. Weasels perhaps. Or rats. But not lions. Even the Muslim Brotherhood has condemned the attacks. Last Thursday, thousands of Jordanians protested across the country, denouncing Zarqawi, America’s most wanted enemy. They marched through Amman chanting: “Burn in hell, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi!” And now the Jordanian police are arresting dozens of known sympathizers and supporters of militant Islam and almost certainly torturing information out of them about their operations in Jordan. Dumb! Very dumb!

But the riots in France take the cake. Here is a nation that is arguably the most promising candidate among all the European states for an eventual peaceful takeover by the Islamists. This place is ideal for them. Heaven sent, so to speak. A natural oasis for wacked out, radical Muslims. It is a large, important nation with atomic weapons, a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, and a citizenry that is so lethargic it has stopped reproducing at replacement levels. It is deeply antagonistic toward the United States, toward capitalism, and toward Islam’s most hated enemy, Israel. In fact, the French are not only seeped in anti-Semitism, they are the fountain from which modern day anti-Semitism bubbled into existence.

And they are tolerant of militant Islam to the point of being reasonably friendly to Islamic murderers. They loved Saddam Hussein. They invested heavily in his future. They fought for his right to kill his fellow Iraqis. They were prominent among the saboteurs of the Oil for Food program. And does anyone care to guess where Yasser Arafat convalesced before passing away? Or where his wife Suha set up residence and proceeded to launder her husband’s ill-gotten gains? Or even where Ayatollah Khomeini spent the last few months of his exile and where he planned the world’s first Islamist revolution? Anyone? Today the

French love Khomeini’s spawn, the mad mullah’s in Iran. They have few if any qualms about Iran having nuclear weapons. French firms have huge investments there. Indeed, a quick look at www.DivestTerror.org reveals that French firms are huge investors in nations sympathetic to militant Islam. The following are a few quotes from that website.

- Alcatel, headquartered in France, has significant operations in three terrorist-sponsoring countries: Iran, Libya and Sudan. It likewise carried out major fiber optics contracts with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq prior to the recent war. The total value of the company’s operations in terrorist-sponsoring states over the past five years is more than \$300 million.
- While BNP Paribas, the leading French bank, is active only in Iran . . . the company is involved in financing projects in that country valued at more than \$2 billion.
- Technip Coflexip, one of France’s largest engineering and construction companies, is extensively involved in the energy sectors of Iran and Libya. The company’s projects in these countries could total as much as \$400 million, and possibly more, depending on the status of contracts and letters of intent recently negotiated with Iranian companies.
- Total SA, headquartered in France, is among the leading energy investors in terrorist-sponsoring states, including Iran, Libya, Sudan, Syria and, prior to the Iraq war, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Its ties to these countries include ownership and development stakes in oil and gas fields that have generated significant revenues for the governments of these countries. Total’s projects in these countries are valued at more than \$3 billion and possibly much higher.

If militant Islam plays this one right, it will, in a decade or two, end up with the kind of safe home base on the European continent unrivaled since January 2, 1492, when Ferdinand and Isabella hoisted the banner of

Christian Spain above the Alhambra, and Boabdil, the last Muslim king, rode weeping into exile with a bitter message from his aged mother reading, “Weep like a woman for the city you would not defend like a man!”

Indeed, if the Islamists have a little patience, they may be able to sweep into the dustbin of history the efforts of Charles Martel, the French hero who, in 732 won the Battle of Tours, and in doing so, in the words of one of my favorite historians, Edward Creesy, “rescued Christendom from Islam, preserved the relics of ancient and the germs of modern civilization. Or if you prefer Gibbon’s take, “rescued our ancestors of Britain and our neighbors of Gaul from the civil and religious yoke of the Koran.”

So what do the Islamists do? They burn French cars. Lots of cars. Scads of cars. Night after night, they burn cars. Boy, do they hate cars. Now I ask you, is that smart? What Arab Napoleon figured this one out? I mean if the goal is to reestablish the Caliphate, cripple the U.S. economy, and destroy Israel, does it make sense to burn cars in France, the one big, important, Western country that is consistently sympathetic to the cause of militant Islam; the one big, important, Western country that is consistently antagonistic toward militant Islam’s enemies?

Now I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that the Islamists did not orchestrate the riots; that the riots just happened, by spontaneous combustion so to speak. Kids will be kids. And you may be right. But if you are, what does that say about the tactical skills of the Islamists? That they have never thought to establish some control over the actions of their fellow Muslims in France and to coordinate the activities there with their activities in the rest of the world? Really? They have no strategic plan for France, where they have the best, long-term chance of establishing a home base for militant Islam in the entire non-Muslim world? No control, no mad Mullahs to manage things? If this is so, all I can is – Dumb! Very dumb!

What these kids have done is provide the French people with a strong warning of things to come. Whether the French will now act decisively to protect

their heritage and their long term interests remains to be seen. But, from the perspective of the Islamists’ cause, providing the French with such a preview of coming attractions was dumb, very dumb!

Now I don’t know where this war of militant Islam against the West is headed in the near future. But I am beginning to think that President Bush is correct when he keeps referring to it as a “war against terror” rather than a war against militant Islam as many people, including yours truly, have maintained over the years would be a better description.

Why? Because a war against militant Islam assumes that there is some sort of Islamic organization involved that has some sort of long-term plan of action. And it is increasingly apparent that there is no such organization or plan. What the United States is fighting is indeed, as President Bush has suggested, a war against a bunch of people who commit acts of terror as a means of dealing with their disillusionment with life in the 21st century. In this sense, Zarqawi, Osama and their “best lions” more closely resemble the mentally disturbed killers, crooks, and social misfits who populate Americas prisons than they do an organized band of dedicated guerrillas in the mold of Chairman Mao’s army or even Fidel’s band of Marxists.

Zarqawi may be older, more focused, and more dangerous than the kids on the streets of Paris who are burning cars. But he is, in reality, one of them: a misfit, out of place in the world around him, desperately trying to be someone. The kids burn cars. He talks people into blowing themselves up. They are all highly dangerous because they would do truly great harm if they could. But, like Stein’s Oakland, there is no there there. No realistic cause. No fundamental belief beyond egoism and feverish dreams of a world that cannot be. Theirs is an old story with a new twist; young men striking out at a world that has, in their opinion, dealt them a bum hand. They are the Arab version of the kind of people most Americans recognize and describe as losers.

ELECTION '05, REVISITED.

I'm not exactly sure what the opposite of "the elephant in the room" is, but if there is such a thing, the vulnerability of the GOP Congressional majority in next year's midterm election is one. The proverbial elephant is something that is obvious but which everyone tries his best to ignore, while the "looming" Democratic takeover of Congress is miles from obvious, yet has become a living, breathing reality to the press and to the partisans in Washington, who dwell on the idea to the point of obsession.

For months, Democrats and their supporters have been whispering about the "similarities" between '06 and '94. And since Hurricane Katrina, disgruntled conservatives have joined in the speculation, ominously warning of "negative indicators" and "wake up calls." Over the past week this conjecture has hit a fever pitch, with both sides seeing portents of things to come in the results of the off-year elections in New Jersey and Virginia.

I continue to believe that the most important "lesson" to be learned from last week's status quo election is that desperate souls will insist that any tiny ray of sunshine is the dawn of a brand new day. But I've had some time to reflect on the results a bit and to draw some further conclusions about what happened in New Jersey and especially in Virginia; why it happened; and what, if anything, can be gleaned from the results relative to next year's battle for Congress. Generally speaking, I don't think there are too many lessons to be learned from it all. But there are at least a few, so here goes.

The first is that while it is important to be consistent and to embrace core positions reliably, it is equally important to know when victory has been achieved on any single issue and therefore when the returns to be gained from stressing it begin to diminish.

In the Virginia Governor's race, for example, Republican Jerry Kilgore made the death penalty the central focus of his campaign, and that hurt him badly. Most of the commentary on Kilgore's decision to hit the death penalty issue has centered

on his contemptible exploitation of grieving family members of murder victims, including the widow of a Winchester, Virginia policeman killed in the line of duty.

While awful and off-putting, those ads were only a part of Kilgore's death penalty problem. The other part was that the issue, which was once an enormous positive for the GOP, particularly in the South, no longer resonates with voters, meaning that Kilgore's focus on the issue was worse than merely heavy handed, it was pointless and distracting.

In the early 1990s, crime and punishment were significant issues for Republican candidates, who were able to paint Democrats as soft-on-crime "bleeding hearts." This was a time when the GOP was beginning to consolidate its power in the South and when Kilgore's friend and political mentor now-Senator George Allen was on his way to sweeping into the Virginia Governor's mansion by promising to end parole.

The issue so resonated with voters then that the consummate politician, Bill Clinton, made a big production of leaving the 1992 presidential campaign at a crucial juncture in order to fly back to Arkansas to sign the death warrant for convicted murderer Ricky Ray Rector, just so that voters would see him serving swift justice and therefore not associate him with the soft-on-crime liberal wing of his party.

Back then, the issue made great political sense, since many average Americans felt besieged by society's violent criminal elements. Crime – violent crime in particular – was on the rise and had been for years. Murderers were being let go on technicalities, and others were treated leniently by the courts and thus granted early release and more opportunities to commit heinous acts. The LA riots and the rise of street gangs further exacerbated the fear felt by many Americans, who simply had the sense that things were out of control and that those responsible for restoring control were unable or unwilling to do so because they were more concerned about criminals and criminals' rights than victims and victims' rights. Against this

backdrop, tough-on-crime Republicans like Allen were able to make headway by focusing on the issue and promising to do something about it.

Today things are notably different. Democrats have gotten the message. And they have joined Republicans in talking and acting tough on crime. More to the point, a decade of reductions in or elimination of parole, of mandatory sentencing, of “three-strikes” laws, and most importantly, of falling crime rates have sapped the issue’s political efficacy. In other words, the issue simply does not resonate with voters the way it once did. This is not to say that the battle against crime has been won. It is, however, to say that the value of crime and punishment as a political issue has decreased considerably.

For years now, Mark and I have noted that one of the principal problems with the ongoing “civil rights” movement is that its leaders refuse to acknowledge that immense progress has been made and that victory over institutional racism has largely been achieved. Racism itself has not been entirely eliminated and will never be, but most institutional barriers precluding equal opportunity have been leveled. So when folks like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton run around the country screaming racism at every possible opportunity, the American public largely views them less as “civil rights advocates” than as grievance mongers, desperately clinging to the old paradigm in the interest of personal and political gain. Virginia voters felt much the same way about Jerry Kilgore, who tried desperately to exploit Governor-elect Tim Kaine’s personal opposition to the death penalty, but ended up instead appearing every bit as cynical, manipulative, and anachronistic as Jackson and Sharpton.

A final part of Kilgore’s problem on the issue of the death penalty was that while he tried to portray his opponent as a typical bleeding-heart, Kaine’s opposition was, in reality, hardly formulaic liberal softness on crime. In fact, Kaine proclaimed openly and repeatedly that his opposition to the death penalty stems from his Catholicism, not his liberalism, putting his views on the issue directly in line with those of the

late, great “conservative” icon Pope John Paul II. And this brings us to the second lesson to be relearned from last week’s elections, namely that values matter.

It seems strange exactly one year after President Bush was re-elected and the Republican majority in Congress was expanded in an election that famously revolved around issues of “morals” and “character” that a Republican candidate in an erstwhile Red state would get trounced in large part because he failed to grasp the importance that “values” play in many voters’ decisions. But that is precisely what appears to have happened in Virginia, where Jerry Kilgore both underestimated the importance of value calculations, misunderstood what “values voters” are looking for and thereby allowed his opponent both to define and win the values component of the contest.

For starters, Tim Kaine buttressed his “pro-life” opposition to the death penalty by contradicting liberal orthodoxy to express his “personal” opposition to abortion. And while he was hardly the first Catholic Democrat ever to take this fainthearted middle road, he did push on further than most others, promising to sign an “enforceable” ban on partial birth procedures and pledging to support abstinence-based sex education. Those who doubted Kaine’s religiosity and questioned his commitment to the values he claimed to espouse surely had their reasons for doing so, but the voters of Virginia don’t appear to have shared those reasons.

Moreover, conservatives may certainly question the logical incongruity of Kaine’s overall position on the death penalty, whereby he has declared his personal opposition to capital punishment but has also pledged not to use his now-constitutionally provided privilege to grant clemency to forestall this “evil.” But attacking him blindly for his religiously formulated beliefs was both unfair and politically costly.

All of the “values” lessons are not negative for the GOP, however, for at least the party should be able to take some solace in the fact that Tim Kaine’s success will not be easily replicated. Kaine was willing to stake his candidacy on what he knew was an unpopular

policy position in an aggressively pro-death penalty state. He therefore gets credit both for having convictions and for having the courage to stand up for them. And that is something that cannot be faked.

On the other hand, a party led by a man who left his church in a dispute over a bike path (Howard Dean, natch) and which is openly contemptuous of traditional and religious principles will have a difficult time finding candidates who not only share the values of the electorate but who can earnestly and sincerely communicate those values to the electorate. In other words, while Kilgore was a uniquely feeble Red-State Republican, Kaine was a uniquely strong Red-State Democrat, which means that the likelihood of Kaine's campaign forming the foundation of a successful national Democratic strategy is exceptionally slim.

The third and, in my opinion, most important lesson to be learned from the 2005 off-year election in Virginia is that a Republican party that is unsure what it believes and which is therefore unwilling or unable to defend itself and its beliefs is doomed.

To understand the point I am trying to make here, I'll begin by noting that it is nearly universally acknowledged that Lt. Governor Tim Kaine's election would not have been possible without the help and support of his friend and boss Governor Mark Warner, who leaves office as one of the most popular governors in Virginia history, with approval ratings topping out at better than 70 percent. What isn't universally acknowledged, but which is nevertheless just as true, is the fact that Governor Warner's popularity is as much a function of the fecklessness of the GOP-dominated Republican legislature in Richmond as it was of anything that Warner himself did to benefit the average Virginian.

Indeed, most Virginians, including yours truly, would be hard pressed to name any single thing Mark Warner did in his four years in Richmond other than raises taxes. Not only did he put the brakes on the elimination of the Commonwealth's much-hated car tax (which, according to the plan put in motion by his predecessor Jim Gilmore, was to be phased out

completely in Warner's second year as Governor), but he also hit the taxpayers of Virginia with the largest tax increase in state history (roughly \$1.5 billion). Additionally, he tried unsuccessfully to raise the sales tax and also tried unsuccessfully to allow counties and municipalities to raise their own tax rates without the approval of the legislature.

Warner claims, of course, that his tax increases preserved the Commonwealth's Triple-A bond rating and helped re-balance the budget. But these are misrepresentations, since Virginia's budget had a surplus of some \$500+ million – due principally to the economic recovery and rising property values – before the tax hike even went into effect. In fact, the tax hike came after *two* consecutive multi-hundred-million dollar surpluses. The principal net effect of the hike therefore was simply to allow Richmond to continue its profligate spending, which has nearly doubled (up some 80 percent) since 1996.

In any case, Warner was never challenged by his political adversaries, in large part because they were the accomplices in his unnecessary tax hikes and free spending. The 2004 tax increase signed by Governor Warner was more than 40 percent higher than that which he'd initially proposed, principally because the Republicans in the Virginia legislature, most notably Senate Majority Leader H. Russell Potts and Senate Finance Chairman John Chichester, actually thought the Governor's figure was too low. Warner got a pass on his monstrous and gratuitous tax hike, on breaking his no-new-tax promise to Virginians, and on expanding the size and scope of Virginia's government because those who should have been leading the fight to preserve the state's business and jobs climate, to defend the taxpayers, and to stall the growth in the state budget were instead too busy counting dollar signs to stand for anything other than the expansion of their personal fiefdoms.

Republican Jerry Kilgore has taken considerable criticism for failing to make taxes a centerpiece of his campaign and for failing to sign the no-tax pledge. And while there is little question that both would have helped and that he could have made headway against

the liberal Kaine by focusing on traditional GOP issues like taxes, the battle was lost long before Kilgore was even nominated. Kaine rode Warner's coattails to victory and was able to do so only because the GOP never defended itself effectively. Kilgore could have hit the tax issue all day and all night for the entirety of the campaign, and it would have had little impact. This battle was lost when the GOP decided it would rather surrender to Warner than stand and fight on principle.

Now, if there is a broader concern for the GOP based on last week's results as possible harbingers heading into next year's midterm, this is it. While I'll grant that the circumstances vary considerably, the national Republican Party, like its Virginia counterpart, appears to have lost the will to stand up and fight. And this may well prove politically disastrous. Part of this is the fault of the Congressional leaders who have forgotten precisely what it is they believe and why it should be defended. But a bigger share of the responsibility here falls on the White House.

If you had told me four years ago, shortly after the September 11 attacks, that one year into Bush's second term, the short recession would be long forgotten; that the economy would be growing at near a four-percent clip for the fourth year in a row; that unemployment would be hovering at just about five percent; that the homeland would have been free of any additional large-scale terrorist attacks; and that both the Taliban and the Saddamite Baathists would have been deposed and replaced by nascent representative governments, all with the loss of fewer than 2500 American soldiers, I'd have assumed that Bush's approval ratings would still be in the 80+ percent range, with the GOP well on its way establishing a permanent (and sizable) majority.

That neither of these circumstances is the case – and that both indeed seem like wild fantasies – is a testament to the sheer awfulness of the expectations management of the current leader of the Republican Party, a.k.a. George Bush. It's not that he manages expectations poorly, you see, it's that he doesn't manage them at all.

As we have written so many times that it is painful even to try to recall, President Bush's unwillingness to defend himself, his administration, and his policies is one of the most baffling mysteries of modern politics. The idea that such an overwhelming percentage of the American population could believe that the nation is headed on the "wrong track," given current conditions, would be flat out ridiculous were it not true. Yet day after day the administration prefers to let its critics pound away at the president, at the vice president, at the Secretary of Defense, and at the policies of the administration with nary a word of rebuttal.

For weeks, the domestic opposition has engaged in the most scurrilous distortion of the record with regard to pre-war intelligence, beating Vice President Cheney savagely in the process. Given that Cheney is among this administration's most articulate and most effective defenders, one would have assumed that he would be allowed not only to refute the charges against the administration but to clear his name. Not so. Cheney is less visible today in the wake of the indictment of his chief of staff than he was when he was at the famous "undisclosed location." Worse, no one else has taken up his defense in his stead, meaning that the Democrats' criticism has been met with silence.

This is not, I should point out, purely an academic debate. As countless analysts have noted since long before the invasion of Afghanistan four years ago, the key to victory in the war on terror and all of its attendant battles will be maintaining the support of the American people. And the White House's steadfast and frankly inexplicable refusal to engage in shoring up that support on a day-to-day basis has had serious repercussions. As *The Weekly Standard's* Bill Kristol pointed out over the weekend:

[T]he attacks have been working. In last week's *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News survey, 57 percent of Americans endorsed that proposition that the president "deliberately misled people to make the case for war with Iraq," compared to 35 percent who thought he "gave the most accurate information he had." Five months ago, those numbers

were 44 percent “misled” versus 47 percent “accurate information.” Eight months ago, shortly after Bush’s second term began, there were only 41 percent who thought Bush had “misled” them, while 53 percent credited the president with being “accurate.” No new information has appeared in those eight months. All that has happened is an unanswered assault by Bush’s enemies.

Last week, during his Veterans’ Day address, President Bush finally began to push back, pointing out the dishonesty in his opponents’ charges and the damage those politically motivated charges have done to the war effort. While we, like many supporters of the war on terror, were pleased to see it, you’ll forgive us if we hold our applause. The administration has lately made a habit of responding to critics with one-off events, presuming that that would be sufficient and would shut the critics up. It hasn’t worked that way, and unless this new offensive is backed by some kind of sustained effort and long-term strategy, it too will fail.

Of course, even if the President does begin to defend his decision to go to war more energetically and more effectively, that will be the mere tip of the proverbial iceberg, with the economy, employment, tax cuts, legislative priorities, and the like still in need of positive spin. For years now, we’ve been told that Karl Rove’s ultimate goal is to establish a lasting legacy of Republican control of government. If that is so, he and his patron are going about things very strangely. If they continue to allow the Democrats and the media to define the Bush presidency as a failure, despite its relative success, then their party will, like its Virginia subsidiary, find itself in a hole entirely of its own creation. And that, if anything, should be the message the White House and the Republican Party take away from last week’s off-year losses.

ELECTION ‘06.

Above, I noted that the President and the Republican Party are digging themselves into a hole.

That said, I still consider a large Democratic victory in next year’s midterm election rather unlikely. History and circumstance both suggest that while there is a threat to the Republican majority, the likelihood of Congress actually changing hands remains pretty slim.

For starters, when all is said and done, the most accurate variable for the prediction of electoral outcomes in this country remains incumbency. The reelection rate of Congressional incumbents in this nation famously rivals that of members of the Soviet Politburo in its heyday, hovering at around 95 percent overall and approaching 98 percent in some recent contests (1998, for example). What is rarely mentioned in discussions of the watershed ’94 elections is the fact that Republicans defeated only two Senate incumbents in that “rout,” picking up the rest of their majority by capturing the Democrats’ unusually high number (six) of open seats. Democrats in the House also had an exceptionally high number of open seats in ’94, a good many of which were picked off by the well-organized and motivated Republicans.

Certainly the dour mood of the electorate and Newt’s soothing Contract with America exploited this high number of vacancies spectacularly, and certainly the underperformance of the Democratic Party in the two years prior to the election contributed to the number of retirements. But all that notwithstanding, the Democrats’ unilateral forfeiture of the advantages of incumbency was almost certainly the deciding factor in that pivotal election.

Fortunately for the GOP, it has no such concerns going into ’06, with only one Senate retirement (Tennessee’s Bill Frist) and only a handful of open seats in the House. In fact, Democrats are defending twice the number of open seats in the Senate (and may lose both) and nearly as many as the GOP in the House. In theory, the Democrats could take control of Congress by defeating a number of incumbents, and certainly they will have some chance for a couple

of pickups. But in order to regain control of either House, the Democrats will have to hold their own, knock off every vulnerable incumbent, and capture all or most of the open seats. None of these is likely to happen next year, no matter how disgruntled the public might be.

Those who assume that the GOP's bad poll numbers – which are admittedly reminiscent of the Democrats' numbers in '93 – portend another Congressional realignment are making several unwarranted suppositions.

First, they are assuming that a single reference point is sufficient to determine a trend, meaning that they believe that polls that show similar attitudes to polls taken before the '94 election necessarily suggest that the result of the elections will be similar. This is, to say the least, over-aggressive extrapolation. With only one previous example on which to base their conclusions, determination of a trend is highly questionable and statistically dubious. Second, they are nevertheless placing such sparse and statistically fallible data on equal footing with one of the most statistically sound and well researched trends in the study of Congressional elections, the incumbency effect, thereby suggesting that perceived voter dissatisfaction a year from an election might somehow be a better predictor of election outcome than incumbency, the heretofore “Gold Standard” in electoral prognostication. Again, color me skeptical.

Now, add to all of this the fact that the Howard Dean Democratic Party is raising money woefully, trailing its rival by significant margins. Add as well the fact that, for all the Republicans' problems, their opponents are still the Dean-Reid-Pelosi Democrats, and Dean continues to prove himself to be as radical and politically tone-deaf as only the most optimistic conservatives could have dreamed. All this means simply that the GOP will be cut a little more slack by voters than would a party facing down an actual viable alternative and that the dire predictions of last week should be taken with a grain of salt.

Finally, it should be noted that the state races won by Democrats last week were, by definition, different than federal elections, in that they lacked a national security component. Note as well that in spite of President Bush's slide in the polls, the American public still does not buy the idea that the Democratic Party is responsible on national security matters. When push comes to shove, American voters are likely to stick with the devil they know over the devil they know will cut and run.

If the Democrats truly believe that they could be the majority party based on domestic issues, then what they should do is follow the advice Mark and I have given them dozens of times over the past couple of years and help the President win the war. Once the enemy is dispatched and national security is no longer a priority, then the Democrats will have the opportunity to reclaim what they insist is rightfully theirs. As liberal blogger Mickey Kaus put it over the weekend:

[W]hat would happen if we won? Or to put it more precisely, what would happen if we stabilized the situation enough to stop the steady combat losses of Americans and enable the Iraqi polity and economy to move forward?...

The answer is pretty obvious: Attention would quickly shift back to domestic issues. Since Bush has no remaining saleable domestic agenda to speak of--and hasn't, really, since the passage of his Medicare drug plan – Democrats would clearly have the advantage....

[S]ucceeding in Iraq, as quickly as possible, may not only be the surest route to the White House for the Democrats. It may also be the quickest. ... If there is a way to win, Democrats have at least as big a partisan incentive to find it as Republicans do.

In other words, if Democrats really believe they can win, they should shut up and give themselves a chance. Otherwise, they may not get that chance for a long, long time.

All things considered then, last week's off-year elections should provide cause for the GOP to stop and rethink its priorities and to re-evaluate what it's doing in preparation for next year's midterm. At the same time, there is no evidence in the results to

presume that the Democratic boosters in the media and elsewhere are necessarily correct that change is coming to Washington and that the Democrats will be the beneficiaries of that change. Though there is ample reason for Republican supporters to be concerned, they can come back in from the ledges for the time being.

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