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THEY SAID IT

Didn't the Democrats use to complain that President Bush didn't have a plan? Now--three years, two months and six days after Congress voted to declare war--they're promising that they'll get around to coming up with a position real soon now. Pelosi also takes some time to celebrate her party's domestic achievements:

Pelosi said Democrats scored significant victories recently, the biggest coming on Social Security, on which she said Democratic opposition to Bush's proposed private or personal accounts blocked any hopes the White House had for changing the government retirement insurance program this year.

"Not only did we take him down on that, but we took down a lot of his credibility as being somebody who cared about 'people like me,' " she said. [from the *Washington Post*]

Spoken like a true patriot!

--James Taranto, "Best of the Web," *OpinionJournal.com*,
December 16, 2005

A GREAT WEEK FOR THE GOP.

For at least two years now, Steve and I have been warning in these pages that no matter how well the military campaign in Iraq goes, the United States can still lose the war if the American people tire of it and conclude that the cost of victory is simply too great. With this in mind, we have often expressed our concerned belief that George Bush is doing a very poor job of performing the most important roll that a President has during war time, which is to assure that the American people continue to support the effort.

A month ago, our anxiety over this issue increased considerably when the White House was very slow to react to public demands by a group of senior leaders of the Democratic Party, including Party Chairman Howard Dean and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, that the United States begin what amounts to an immediate withdrawal of troops. Adding fuel to our apprehension was considerable evidence that a great many Republicans in both the Senate and the House were beginning to waver in their support for the war in the face of the Democratic criticism and the tepid reaction by the White House.

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A week later, however, in response to these events, President Bush began a concerted public relations campaign to shore up support for the war. This provided a glimmer of hope to those of us who think withdrawal would be a disaster. But it was not at all clear at the time that he would be successful.

And then, last week, it began to look as though the President's efforts were not only working; but were working very well. In fact, his campaign began to look so successful that one could be forgiven for believing that the antiwar movement may have reached its apogee and that the only way for it to go between now and the elections next year is down. This is, of course, a highly subjective observation. But a number of factors strongly point in this direction.

First, there was Election Day in Iraq, which went so well that even the liberal network news commentators and some of the most anti-American newspapers and newswires in the world had to take an upbeat approach when covering the event. Even *Reuters* was forced to address the story on a positive note.

There may not be the same sense of history this time round, but the joy and determination of Iraqi voters emerging from dictatorship is still evident. Young and old, able-bodied and infirm, they streamed to polls for the third time in 11 months on Thursday, this time to elect a four-year parliament.

While not as novel as the first post-Saddam Hussein election in January, participation was more widespread. Sunni Arabs, who boycotted the earlier poll for an interim assembly, flocked to vote this time, determined not to miss out on power again. "I'm delighted to be voting for the first time," said 21-year-old driver Jamal Mahmoud in Ramadi, a Sunni Arab city west of Baghdad that has been at the front line of the anti-American insurgency for the past two years.

Certainly, thought I, the success of this election will force the antiwar Democrats to hunker down for a while, to curtail their public pronouncements of pessimism and their demands that American troops be withdrawn. And the very next day, Nancy Pelosi went one step further. Not only did she refrain from uttering her customary forecasts of defeat and demand for a troop withdrawal, but she actually abandoned her *de facto* campaign to make her antiwar views an official part of the Democratic Party's platform for the 2006 elections. She noted that while Democrats will produce an issue agenda for these elections, this agenda will not include a position on Iraq. According to the *Washington Post*, she stated her case as follows:

There is consensus within the party that President Bush has mismanaged the war and that a new course is needed, but House Democrats should be free to take individual positions, she said. "There is no one Democratic voice . . . and there is no one Democratic position."

Of course, it isn't clear that Ms. Pelosi's stance on this subject has any more support within her party than does her antagonism toward the war. Indeed, it is worth noting that the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Congressman Rahm Emanuel, recently said that while the Party has no official position on the war at the present time, it will have one "at the right time." So, the real message from Pelosi, Emanuel and their party appears to be, "We're confused now, but stay tuned," which is about as good as it gets for the White House and the GOP.

Finally, the antiwar movement suffered another blow last week when Hillary Clinton once again refused to bow to demands from the extreme left wing of her party that she enthusiastically endorse the antiwar effort. Thus, she affirmed for the world to see, and most importantly for her fellow Democrats to see, that the party's titular frontrunner for the 2008 nomination considers the pull-the-troops-out-now position to be a loser.

This does not mean, of course, that she is either supportive of the President or of the war. Her position, which is rapidly becoming that of her party,

remains exactly what it has been all along, namely that she will stay as neutral as possible until she gets a better idea of the outcome, at which time she will, if the war is going well, maintain that she had never wavered in her support for the enterprise, or, if the war is going badly, that she was always skeptical of the venture and always critical of Bush's handling of it.

Of course, this type of fence straddling is not unusual in politics. It has always been a staple among politicians for whom ambition is more important than principle. My favorite example is the story told of the dissolute but brilliant Talleyrand, sitting in his house with a friend during the revolution of 1830, watching out the window as the fighting went on between the government forces of Charles X and the revolutionaries. Asked by his friend, "Who is winning?" Talleyrand responded, "We are." When asked, "Who do you mean, when you say 'we,'" Talleyrand replied, "I'm not sure yet."

This could, of course, be only a temporary denouement in the battle for the hearts and minds of the American people over the war in Iraq. The Peolosi, Reid, Murtha forces could quickly become revitalized if the insurgency were to score some bloody and high profile victories over American and Iraqi troops, or if the fledgling Iraqi government were to run into trouble.

However, this possibility seems much less likely today, in light of the aggressive posture that Bush assumed in his speech last night and in his news conference this morning, during which he left little doubt that he is no longer going to shrink from the task of defending himself and his policies against often untrue and unfair attacks from the left.

While I would like to provide an in-depth analysis of the President's public presentation and the likely impact of both appearances, time and space preclude such an analysis at this time. Even if I had the time, though, I don't think I could put it any better than University of Tennessee Law professor and "blogfather" Glenn Reynolds (a.k.a. Instapundit), who put it thusly last night:

[O]ne big thing struck me: In this national televised speech, Bush went out of his way to take responsibility for the war. He repeatedly talked about "my decision to invade Iraq," even though, of course, it was also Congress's decision. He made very clear that, ultimately, this was his war, and the decisions were his.

Why did he do that? Because he thinks we're winning, and he wants credit. By November 2006, and especially November 2008, he thinks that'll be obvious, and he wants to lay down his marker now on what he believed – and what the other side did.

Fortunately for President Bush and, by extension, the GOP, the "other side" appears to be playing right into this strategy. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's response to the President's new aggressiveness had been beyond pathetic. As such, if President Bush continues his offensive and continues to be as effective, and if the Democrats continue to respond as lamely, then the battle for the hearts and minds of the American people will likely be won and many of the GOP's fears about next year's midterms will likely be eased considerably.

In the meantime, the message from last week is that there is reason to be optimistic about the war in Iraq, the movement toward a democratic government in that benighted land, and the prospects that 2006 will be a good year for the GOP. This, in turn, bodes well for approval of an extension of the tax breaks on capital gains and dividends, for some progress on holding down federal spending, for a White House victory in the battle over extending the Patriot Act, and for a November election that allows Republicans to retain control of both the House and the Senate.

It also means that the President should be in reasonably good shape with the American public if he must present the Iranians with a credible threat of military action should they fail to abandon their plans to develop nuclear weapons.

HOLLYWOOD'S DESCENT INTO MADNESS.

Another week. Another eagerly anticipated blockbuster opening. Another flop. Actually, that's not fair. Kong didn't exactly flop. But the big ape's opening weekend was unquestionably a disappointment, falling considerably short of the records its financial supporters and many Hollywood "experts" had predicted.

In response, over the next week or two, we are likely to see another rash of news, opinion, and "analysis" pieces declaring an unprecedented "crisis" in the movie industry. And it's no wonder. This has been a terrible year for movies makers -- the worst in roughly two decades, in fact -- with box office receipts showing a huge drop-off, despite a handful of hoped-for blockbusters, including a new Harry Potter sequel, the final episode of George Lucas's seemingly endless "Star Wars" series, the first installment of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, and the aforementioned remake of King Kong.

A great many movies by established directors with established box-office stars actually lost money this year, and this, in addition to the drop in overall receipts, has driven Hollywood to the verge of panic. The rough times have prompted speculation among industry "insiders" that studios may soon be compelled to slash production budgets, to lay off crew members, and even -- gasp! -- to write smaller paychecks to the big shots who have grown accustomed to making \$20 million or so for a couple months of "work."

These same insiders have an explanation -- or several explanations, to be more precise -- as to why this year has been so awful. The biggest part of the problem, it turns out, is "competition" for Americans' entertainment dollars. DVD sales and rentals are the main culprit here. Why, after all, would someone spend \$10+ a ticket to watch a movie in a crowded theater when that same ten bucks will rent the same movie, plus two others, that can be watched in the comfort of home? Then, of course, there are video

games, and iPods, and video iPods, and a host of other electronic entertainment gizmos, all of which allow entertainment to be personalized. And this, the story goes, takes money and consumer time away from movie business.

Another popular explanation for Hollywood's terrible year is the old stand-by "lack of original ideas." Apparently, according to those who profess to know about this kind of thing, moviegoers hate sequels, hate remakes, and hate big-screen versions of 1970s television shows. Audiences are tired of the same-old same-old and want to be wowed and thrilled by originality, creativity, and daring. Or that's at least what the experts say.

The only problem with what the experts say is that it's nearly uniformly wrong. DVD sales this year are down markedly as well, and this suggests the possibility that the pat line about home entertainment producing unfair "competition" is more of an excuse than an explanation. Theater releases have been competing against functional home entertainment for the better part of a quarter century; certainly the advances in home entertainment haven't altered the competitive market too terribly in one year's time. Yet year-over-year, box office ticket sales are off 6.2% and revenues are off better than 5%.

And as for the drop being related to a lack of ideas, the biggest grossing film of the year is the *fifth* sequel to 1977's "Star Wars." The second biggest is the *fourth* Harry Potter movie, and number five in gross receipts is a remake of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." In fact, when all is said and done, the remake of "King Kong" will probably fall in the top five grossing films as well. In other words, Americans are not exactly rioting in the streets over the lack of original material.

But if neither competition nor unoriginality is Hollywood's problem, then what is? I don't mean to put too fine a point on this, but as far as I can tell, the reason that fewer average Americans are going to the movies is because Hollywood is making fewer movies that average Americans would care very much to go see. Not sure what I mean? Well, a quick glance at

the just-released Golden Globe nominations will help make my point. In the estimation of the industry insider-types in the Hollywood Foreign Press, the following are the “best” films of the year, as described by author/bloggess/“progressive feminist” Tammy Bruce.

- 1) A love story between two gay shepherders (erroneously labeled ‘cowboys’ by the media, I suppose because they wear hats). [“Brokeback Mountain”]
- 2) A film portraying as noble the efforts of journalists to demonize and “take down” a US Senator whose anti-communist policies they did not like. [“Good Night. And, Good Luck”]
- 3) A film about, as one movie-going reviewer noted, “. . . the horrors of big business and the way they are willing to experiment on the poor to achieve their goals . . . [“The Constant Gardener”]
- 4) The demonization of the average mid-western American man as someone who is no hero, but a cold-blooded killer at heart. [“A History of Violence”]
- 5) And lastly, a Woody Allen film about infidelity. Well, he should know. [“Match Point”]

Is it any wonder then that Americans haven’t been knocking down the doors of movie theaters, given that this is the fare they’re being offered?

Over the past twenty-five years or so, the American public has, by and large, become more conservative. Republicans have won five of the seven presidential elections since 1980. The GOP has taken over and held for better than a decade both houses of Congress. For the first time since before the Great Depression, more Americans identify themselves as Republicans than Democrats. At the very least, on cultural matters, the general public has become

modestly reactionary, rejecting many of the excesses of the liberal counterculture and demonstrating at least a superficial affinity for what can be called “traditional” values. Yet over the same period of time, Hollywood has continued to move further and further left and continued to make movies reflecting that social/cultural/political slant.

This isn’t to say that Hollywood shouldn’t make movies reflecting the thoughts, hopes, dreams, and desires of its denizens. If that’s what the big Hollywood studios want to do, more power to them. But they should not be surprised when average Americans aren’t all that excited about plopping down ten bucks to see a bunch of pampered millionaires whine about what they think is wrong with the world and how Americans exacerbate whatever’s wrong with the world. If Ang Lee wants to make a movie about gay cowboys (Sorry, Tammy. Shepherders...) complete with what is described in reviews as “graphic” scenes of gay sex, that’s his business. But the idea that anyone should be surprised when average Americans decide that maybe they have better things to do with their time and their money than to go see his soft-porn epic is insane.

The cultural disconnect between Hollywood and middle America has grown incrementally over the last four or five decades. And one could very easily argue that that disconnect is, today, greater than it’s ever been and likely to grow even greater. Though “Brokeback Mountain” is the height of artistic expression among the glitterati right now, there is a limit to how many gay or abortion-themed movies the American public could possibly care to see. But that won’t stop Hollywood from waging its own little war against the values that its purported target audience embraces and from assuming that that audience is too stupid to notice.

While polls confirm that many Americans are still skeptical about the war in Iraq and are not necessarily terribly excited about the broader war on terror, the overwhelming majority still understand that they are the good guys in this fight (or any fight, for that matter) and that America, its people, its government,

and its armed forces are forces for good in the world. In Hollywood, by contrast, anti-Americanism appears to have reached unprecedented levels. Indeed, in the movie business, the war on terror has been viewed as a godsend, allowing filmmakers to relive their glory days and revive the expressions of anti-military and anti-American sentiment they'd abandoned briefly after they overdid the whole "awfulness of Vietnam" cliché.

This past August, filmmaker Jason Apuzzo wrote an article in which he described his fellow moviemakers' contribution to the war on terror, "namely, glossy, star-studded movies that sympathize with the enemy." Of the ten movies Apuzzo described, two have already been released. They are "Jarhead," an indictment of the Marine Corps based on left-wing activist Andrew Swofford's "notorious and questionable memoirs of the same name" and "Syriana," George Clooney's "profound" and "insightful" epic about how oil companies are the real bad guys in the Middle East. Both proved to be box office flops, despite having big-name, normally "bankable" box-office stars (Clooney, Matt Damon, Jamie Foxx). A third, "Munich," which is Steven Spielberg's tiresome tale of moral equivalence, will open this weekend and has already been panned by a number of observers from outside of Hollywood as unduly sympathetic to the Palestinian terrorists who carried out the murders of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Summer Olympics. Its box office prospects are considered by many to be nominal at best.

The remaining films on Apuzzo's list are even more critical of American business, the American military, and even the American President, and therefore can be expected to have a comparable effect on the American public, who will likely stay away in droves from these films as well. Add all of this to Hollywood liberals' propensity for lecturing Americans about their social and political behavior and for inserting themselves into causes that most Americans find distasteful at a minimum (for example, the effort to spare the life of gang founder and convicted triple-murderer Tookie Williams), and it's no wonder the public's once torrid love affair with Hollywood has grown shockingly frigid.

Now, think about this narrative for a moment. It features an insulated elite that is culturally disconnected from mainstream America, that is obsessed with the "dark side" of the country and particularly the "dark side" of the nation's military and its foreign policy, that is equally obsessed with Vietnam and the "lessons" from that war, and is consequently struggling to maintain its popularity. If this sounds familiar, it's no mere coincidence, since, in a number of ways, Hollywood's problems run parallel to those of the political party it overwhelmingly supports.

One of the Democratic Party's biggest problems these days – aside from its disconnect from the public, of course – is that it is in denial about the real source of its drop in popularity. For as long as the GOP has been ascendant, the Democrats have made up excuses as to why. Today, party leaders insist that they and their brand of social liberalism (libertinism?) are truly representative of the public and that voters have simply been fooled by Republicans, who manipulate religion to convince them to vote against their own economic interests and who manipulate fears about terrorism to convince them to support unnecessary domestic infringements on freedom and equally unnecessary and destructive wars. The Democrats continue to delude themselves about their slide into the minority and continue to take as objective the confirmation of their delusions by a pliant, liberal media.

The same thing is happening in Hollywood. The big players have all convinced themselves that their problems are unrelated to the post-modern content of their films and have instead found blame in DVDs and the like. The mainstream press, of course, repeats these assumptions as if they were fact, and thereby serves as an echo chamber for Hollywood, confirming what it believes to be true, but which is not supported by the empirical evidence.

One would think that the rare blockbusters that Hollywood has produced over the past few years would provide the studios with some clues. The biggest, most successful, most profitable films all

feature simple, classic storylines that portray the struggle between good and evil in stark, unambiguous terms and which feature the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Recall that this year's biggest films include both Harry Potter and Lewis's "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," and that the biggest films of the past few years have included Potter (again and again) and Tolkein's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. Even this year's largest grossing film, "Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith" benefits from this same basic storyline.

Though George Lucas is one of the most annoyingly simpleminded, preachy Hollywood liberals, one who insists that right and wrong and good and evil are far from clear-cut, the success of his "Star Wars" series is principally a function of the astounding success of the first film, which was released at the height of the Cold War and which told the tale of the good guys' battle against the all-powerful "Evil Empire." The metaphor in the film was so unmistakable (to everyone but Lucas, apparently) that its terminology was quickly adapted to the Cold War, and even its title became shorthand for President Reagan's plans to undermine the evil Soviet empire through the Strategic Defense Initiative.

The problem Hollywood faces is not that DVD's are more convenient and cheaper (though they are both), but that Americans have grown weary of the post-modern shtick in which they and people like them are portrayed as the bad guys. They have grown equally tired of movies that imply that they are somehow wicked for embracing religion and traditional morality.

There was a time when Hollywood made movies that appealed to the masses, but that was long ago, when it shared the values of those masses. Today, both the movie industry and the Democratic Party have "evolved" beyond the morality of the public and share the belief that being true to their "values" is more important than reflecting the values of those they purport to woo. This strategy has proven to be a loser for both, and will continue to be such.

WES POLK UPDATE:

Two years ago, in the December 8, 2003 issue of this newsletter, we ran the following notice.

As regular readers know, I (Mark) live on a farm in a small rural community called Mt. Jackson, Virginia, population 1,583. Almost three years ago, a friend of mine who lives nearby, Wesley Polk, lost his hand and forearm in an accident with a wood splitter. Insurance took care of most of the medical bills but would pay for only the most rudimentary prosthesis, i.e., one that features what I would describe as a large, metal, pinching device in place of a hand and held on by a large, unwieldy harness.

Wes who is about 30 years old, drives a dump truck now for a living and while he makes enough money to take care of his family, there is not much of a chance that he will ever be able to save the \$32,743 that a decent prosthesis would cost. So, a friend and I decided that together we could find 328 people who would pay \$100 each to provide Wes with a state-of-art forearm and hand. In a large, suburban area this would not seem like much of a task. Here in Mount Jackson, it is a bit of a challenge. But we're plugging along with the donation campaign, and making plans to pick up \$1,000 or so from a pig roast this spring and a post-Christmas dance at the local Moose Lodge.

Anyway, on the chance that you would like to make a \$100 non-tax-deductible donation to a good cause, send cash or check (made out to the Wesley Polk Fund) to me, Mark Melcher, 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842. Wes and his family would appreciate it, and so would I. (I am aware that clients don't pay Steve and me to be asked for donations to a personal cause. If I have offended anyone by this note, please accept my apology. Mark)

Last year, in the November 22, 2004 issue, I informed readers that we had \$24,000 in the bank. I noted that a great many \$100 checks had rolled in from readers of this newsletter, along with several contributions that were considerably larger. In addition, I said that we had raised a considerable amount locally, via direct contributions, church functions, dances, and raffles. I pointed out that while we had underestimated the difficulty we would have raising \$32,743 in a small, rural community like Mt. Jackson we did not underestimate the kindness and generosity of the people in this little town or of the readers of this newsletter.

Today, I am pleased to say that we are close enough to having \$30,000 in the bank that Wes recently had his first appointment with the prosthesis people to get fitted for a new arm. The fund raising will go on, but the bottom line is that *WES WILL GET HIS ARM* sometime this spring. It was a long, often frustrating process. But it worked, thanks to the generosity of a great many wonderful people, including many readers of this newsletter.

I ran into Wes this week and I can't describe how thankful he and his family are for the help you all have given him and how excited he is about the prospects of having a hand that works somewhat the same as the one he lost. As I said, we're still a little short of money. If you have already given, please don't consider this to be another solicitation, but just accept my thanks once again for your generosity and kindness. If you meant to give last year or the year before and just didn't get around to it, it's not too late. We can still use the money.

In closing, I would repeat what I said last year and the year before, namely that I am aware that clients don't pay Steve and me to be asked for donations to a personal cause, and if I have offended anyone by this note, please accept my apology.

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