

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days.

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 1922

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DOMESTIC POLITICS 2006: MEDIOCRITY VS. INEPTITUDE.

As usual, I liked Mark's article last week. I thought it was insightful and, as always, compellingly written. The one part that bothered me, though, was his introduction, the part in which he described the two basic types of forecasting and discussed briefly their relative value. For those few of you who have yet to commit the entire essay to memory, Mark discussed forecasting thusly:

There are two different kinds of forecasts. The difference between the two is not precise, but I define them this way. The first, which I will call the step-up-to-the-plate forecast, is the kind that deals with a reasonably specific situation that involves a finite number of variables and the possibility of getting at least some specific information concerning the outcome. An example would be the question of whether the Senate will consent to Judge Alito's appointment to the Supreme Court. This is basically a yes/no proposition. There are people with whom one can talk who are "in the know," so to speak, and the system by which the outcome will be decided is well understood and thus somewhat predictable.

The second kind of forecast, which might be described as blue-sky forecasting, involves painting on a much broader canvas. The questions addressed have endless variables and there are no individuals around who have the kind of “inside track” that would be decisive in arriving at a firm conclusion. This is the kind of situation that Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld was describing when he offered the following soliloquy: “As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” An example of this type forecasting would be predicting how the dispute with Iran over its nuclear weapons program will be resolved.

Those who deal in the first type of forecast are expected to be accurate most of the time. (emphasis added)

Now I don’t mean to pick on my good friend, intellectual soul mate, and business partner of the past nine years, but the fact of the matter is that he set me up. He wisely bestowed upon himself the ability to revisit his predictions and declare that the klunkers were merely “attempts to establish a framework from which one can anticipate surprises and assess developments.” But I, by and contrast and by Mark’s declaration, am to be afforded no such luxury – at least not this week. I am “expected to be accurate most of the time.” Of course, not being one to complain, I’ll soldier on and do my best under less-than-ideal circumstances. So here goes.

Prediction #1: The Abramoff scandal will be big but not exceptionally so. Some Republicans—including members of Congress and outside “activists” – will suffer appropriately and will see their careers ruined. But the GOP as a whole will not be destroyed and will not even be effectively tarred as the “party of corruption.” In the end, those who will suffer the most for the criminal

activities of a few men and the arrogance of a great many others will be the American people, who will once again see government “reformed” in a manner that further distances elected representatives from their constituents.

With all of the breathless reporting of late by the mainstream media about the Abramoff/lobbying scandal, one might reasonably conclude not only that the GOP Congressional majority is doomed but that a parade of Republicans led away from Capitol Hill in handcuffs will once and for all end the “revolution” begun better than a quarter-century ago by Ronald Reagan. But it’s not gonna’ happen.

Make no mistake, the scandal will do damage to the Republican Party. It appears that at least one GOP member of Congress will be indicted. And, of course, former Majority Leader Tom DeLay has already been forced to abandon his plan to return to his leadership post. Abramoff’s plea deal last week will keep Washington tongues wagging and keep the scandal on the front pages for several months. And, as our good friend Rich Galen (www.mullings.com) noted last week, it will affect the way everyone in Washington does business for some time and will open up a great many politicians of both parties to a great deal of scrutiny.

That said, when the dust finally settles, I believe it will be difficult for Democrats to parlay a handful of criminal acts into an effective campaign strategy based on the slogan “culture of corruption.” The problems the Democrats will face in using the Abramoff scandal as a campaign tool are manifold. First of all, most of what went on – at least as far as Congress is concerned – was legal. It was unseemly, unbecoming, improper, and unsuitable for the representatives of the people of the United States, yes, but ultimately legal. Second, despite the fact that all of the public attention thus far has centered on Republicans and their shady ties to Jack Abramoff, the scandal will ultimately reach beyond the GOP. Abramoff and others like him spread the wealth around, and Democratic members of Congress will not emerge from this episode wholly untainted.

In the end, Republicans will, I believe, have two men in particular to thank for the fact that the public will likely not punish the GOP indiscriminately, both of them Democrats.

The first, of course, is Bill Clinton. The Abramoff scandal would, I believe, be a much bigger deal if the American public hadn't been exposed to – and therefore desensitized to – terms like *quid pro quo* and “favors for sale” for the better part of the last decade. We tend to forget, given that Bill's impeachment was related to his infidelity and perjury, that the real scandal of the Clinton presidency was a long chain of fundraising abuses beginning with Commerce Secretary and former DNC Chairman Ron Brown's “trade missions” abroad for big contributors to the Clinton White House.

There was, in addition, you may recall, ample evidence that the Clinton administration and its fundraising arm at the Democratic National Committee took highly questionable, if not patently illegal donations from some very unsavory and dangerous characters – including Chinese arms dealers – and likely “tweaked” policy in return for these donations. Al Gore shook down Buddhist nuns and made illegal fundraising calls from his White House office; the Lincoln Bedroom was always occupied, usually by the highest bidder; and John Huang and his cronies at the DNC ran one of the most obscenely inappropriate and shameful fundraising operations in the history of American politics.

Nevertheless, the public failed to work up any outrage over that scandal. If anything, the Clinton fundraising improprieties merely reinforced the perception that “everyone does it” and that skirting the law to raise money is simply the way Washington works today. The Abramoff scandal will likely have the same effect. Democrats will certainly try to convince voters that this is exclusively a Republican issue, but Americans are not nearly as stupid as Nancy Pelosi et al. believe, and their memories are not nearly as short.

The second Democrat to whom Republicans will owe a debt of gratitude is Travis County, Texas District Attorney Ronnie Earle. When he indicted then-Majority Leader DeLay last fall, Earle may have won a hard-fought personal victory over the Texas GOP and its leader, but he also did the national Republican Party an enormous favor by providing it with an excuse and an opportunity to distance itself from DeLay before his connections to Abramoff became widely known.

If and when the proverbial other shoe drops on DeLay, the Republican Party will be able to point to the fact that DeLay is no longer part of the leadership and to claim that the Party and its Congressional contingent have abandoned DeLay-style tactics and moved on to address the challenges of governance. This contention would carry a great deal more credibility, of course, if the party had distanced itself from DeLay before an indictment came down, perhaps as long as 13 months ago (which is when I noted DeLay's ethical problems in these pages and advocated removing him from the leadership). But in any case, he's gone, and Ronnie Earle helped clear the path for his removal, which should help the GOP weather this storm.

There is much more that should be said about this scandal, about its short and long-term repercussions, its effect on the GOP, its likely effect on the political climate in Washington, and about corruption in general. But I have other predictions to make and must move on, though I strongly suspect that both Mark and I will revisit this topic several times during the remainder of 2006.

In closing, though, I would stress, as I did in the above prediction, that the real, long-term importance of this scandal will not be its effect on the GOP or any individual member of Congress. It will relate to the unfortunate fact that whenever members of Congress are caught with their hands in the cookie jar, the rules governing said cookie jar are rewritten, “reform” is proposed and passed. And this “reform” is never directed at limiting the power vested in the politicians, which is, after all, responsible for the corruption in

the first place, but inevitably involves making it more difficult for individuals and businesses to keep the heavy foot of government off their throats by limiting their ability to influence that government.

Mark and I have made this point numerous times in these pages over the years. I'll close with a few lines from one such article, written almost four years ago. It was about Senator McCain's efforts back then to "reform" the campaign finance laws and was entitled "No Good Will Come Of This."

The fact is, as I have said over and over again for many years in columns about this type of legislation, the growth in corruption in Washington in the past several decades is derivative of the growth of power in Washington during the same period. The federal government today exercises close to complete control over virtually every aspect of the life of every individual American and every group of individual Americans. Who can blame them for forming into what McCain and his cronies disdainfully describe as "special interest groups" in an attempt to protect their hopes, dreams, aspirations, and very lives from this colossus of raw power?

As Steve Soukup and I wrote in a piece [dated March 8, 2000] entitled "The Iron Biangle," the bottom line on this legislation is that it dramatically weakens one leg of the famous Iron Triangle of modern American government, made up of politicians, bureaucrats and individuals. In doing so, it destabilizes the entire structure, vesting almost complete power in the hands of the politicians and bureaucrats at the expense of the nation's individual citizens.

Needless to say, the "reform" that emerges from this scandal will do the same.

Prediction #2: The Democratic Party will continue its ongoing struggle to alienate itself from the overwhelming majority of American

voters on a great many issues, most notably matters of national security, and more specifically on the war in Iraq and the broader war on terror.

The principal reason that I believe the aforementioned Abramoff scandal will fail to undermine the GOP majority is because anything that damages the Republicans will, by definition, help the Democrats. And the leaders of the Democratic Party are likely to spend the next ten months reminding the American people why nothing should be done to "help the Democrats." I have long believed and have suggested several times in these pages that the Republicans' greatest asset today is their opponent, and that opponent will, I believe, continue to prove my point.

Not long ago, I had come to believe that the Democratic leaders could not be any more politically tone deaf than they were when they called for an immediate withdrawal from Iraq and a *de facto* declaration of defeat on the eve of that nation's historic parliamentary elections. Then, along came the *New York Times* and its "blockbuster" about warrant-less wiretaps. And, well, the rest is history.

Think for a minute about what the Democratic Party brings to the table right now: a party chairman who openly admits that he believes the war in Iraq is lost; a House leader who openly advocates immediate withdrawal from the battlefield; a Senate leader who proudly proclaims that he "killed" the renewal of the Patriot Act, which is vital to the war on terror and which is supported by the majority of Americans; a prominent House anti-warrior who frets publicly about a "slow withdrawal [from Iraq] which makes it look like a victory"; and a handful of political ignoramuses who publicly discuss impeaching the president for acting aggressively to protect Americans against terrorism. It would, in my estimation, be next to impossible even to imagine a party more completely disconnected from political reality and therefore less capable exploiting its opponent's flaws.

A handful of Democrats, most notably former Clinton White House aide and current chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee

Rahm Emanuel, are smart enough to know that national security issues are not their party's strength. They have therefore tried desperately to steer the political conversation away from the war on terror, away from the war in Iraq, away from anything that might remind the public of the party's dovish/defeatist predisposition. This is, of course, smart politics. It is also a hopelessly futile endeavor, the modern equivalent of Sisyphus's task.

And it's not simply that the leaders of the Democratic Party will be unable to exercise even a modicum of self control. The real problem here is that most of the party's leaders are entirely unaware that national security is a liability for them. Still trapped in late 1960s hippie time warp, the likes of John Kerry, Teddy Kennedy, Nancy Pelosi, Barbara Boxer, and Howard Dean are still under the misimpression that their side "won" the domestic battle over Vietnam. And they are bound and determined not to stop until they have re-created the "successful" political atmosphere that led to their candidate losing 49 of 50 states in the 1972 presidential election.

In conclusion, as long as rabid and uncontrollable reactionary ideologues like Howard Dean hold positions of prominence in the party, pragmatic political operators like Rahm Emanuel will find their efforts undermined. As such, we can expect for Kerry, Pelosi, Kennedy, Boxer, Murtha, and most especially Howard Dean to continue, over the next several months, to embarrass themselves and their party with their inappropriate and impolitic rhetoric on the war and other matters of national security. And speaking of Dr. Dean . . .

Prediction #3: By year's end, Howard Dean will be out as Chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

I'm not entirely sure of the mechanism here, whether Dean will be pushed out by saner heads within the party or if he will leave of his own accord. But it is clear that this relationship has grown rather frazzled and that each side would be relieved to be rid of the other.

On the one hand, mainstream Democrats cannot tolerate Dean's um . . . "quirkiness" much longer. They know that every time he opens his mouth in public there is a very real chance that he will say something even more ridiculous and outlandish than the last ridiculous and outlandish thing he said. They have learned in his short stint at the DNC that Dean is the guy for whom the phrase "accident waiting to happen" was invented.

Certainly, Dean has served a vital purpose, namely making Hillary look reasonable by comparison. But his usefulness to the party establishment has long since expired, particularly since he has been an absolute disaster as a fundraiser, which was his purported strong suit. At some point, Bill, Hillary, and the rest of the party establishment types are going to come to the realization that Dean has outlived his purpose and threatens to damage the long-term standing of the party. I believe that point will come this year. If they can figure out a way to do it without looking incredibly crass, the Democratic Party bigwigs will fire Dean before the end of the year.

That is, of course, unless Dean quits first. When Dean took the chairman's position, he agreed in principle not to run for the party's presidential nomination in '08. But with Hillary appearing to close in on the nomination before the primary campaign has even begun, Dean is almost certainly having second thoughts about this deal.

You see, in a world of enormous egos, Dean's is in a class by itself. The good doctor believes himself indispensable to the nation and to his party and will have a very difficult time standing by and watching the nomination being locked up by someone who is out of touch with the party's values, as he undoubtedly believes the nominally pro-war on terror Senator Clinton to be.

Egged on by the far-left anti-warriors and bloggers, who will, in time, grow tired of the personality-free Russ Feingold, Dean will yearn once again to hit the campaign trail and take his message to New

Hampshire, and on to South Carolina, and Oklahoma, and Arizona, and North Dakota, and New Mexico..., etc., etc.,...yeaaaaaargh!

Prediction #4: Judge Sam Alito will be confirmed to the United States Supreme Court, but not before a handful of Democratic Senators, including at least one presidential wannabe, embarrass themselves.

This prediction needs little explication, in my estimation. There are 55 Republican Senators. No more than two will vote against Alito. At least one Democrat, Ben Nelson of Nebraska, and perhaps a handful of others, will vote to confirm. Short of a filibuster, which appears unlikely at this point, Alito will be confirmed.

While confirmation appears imminent, Democratic stalwarts like Chuck Schumer, Ted Kennedy, and Joseph Biden will nevertheless try to score a few rhetorical points and further ingratiate themselves with the party's left-wing base. All they will manage to accomplish, however, will be to confirm that the left wing of the party is as out of touch with the nation's political mainstream on cultural matters as it is on matters of national security. Sam Alito is not Robert Bork. And Kennedy and his cronies will look pretty foolish trying to portray him thusly.

**Prediction #4, Part II: "Out of Left Field"
Prediction: Sam Alito will not be President Bush's last Supreme Court nominee of the year.**

Justice John Paul Stevens is 85. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg is 72 and has had several well-publicized health scares over the last few years. One of two will retire this year, though he or she will wait until as late in the year as possible, in the hope that Democrats will strengthen their hand in the Senate. Bush will, I believe, nominate an overtly conservative woman (Janice Rogers Brown, Priscilla Owens) as a replacement.

Prediction #5: 2006 will, at long last, be the year a charismatic black conservative is elected to statewide office.

Three black conservatives are seeking high-profile statewide offices this election cycle. They are Michael Steele, who is running for Senate in Maryland; Ken Blackwell, who is running for governor in Ohio; and Hall of Fame wide receiver Lynn Swann, who is running for governor in Pennsylvania. As things stand today, all three are considered underdogs. Nevertheless, at least one of the three will win. I know precious little about Swann as a politician, but the other two are, in my opinion, top-flight men and top-flight candidates.

If I had my druthers and could only pick one, I'd pull for Blackwell. As you may recall, Ohio was *the* swing state in last year's presidential election, and having it governed by a talented, Catholic, bona fide conservative of any race would be invaluable to the GOP's presidential nominee in '08. Besides, Blackwell is a genuinely good guy who took an awful beating after the '04 election from both the press and the "civil rights" establishment simply for doing his job and ensuring the integrity of the Ohio election system.

Prediction #6: Both political parties will have new leaders in the House of Representatives by year's end.

For the GOP, this is a no-brainer, since Tom DeLay announced over the weekend that he is permanently vacating his leadership post and candidates have already begun campaigning to replace him. The race for majority leader boils down to Roy Blunt, Majority Whip and acting-Majority Leader, against John Boehner, Chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee. I predict that the unexciting Blunt will win the slot over the equally unexciting Boehner. The only excitement will come when Virginian Eric Cantor is elected Majority Whip, which will be a notably positive development for his party.

As for the Democrats, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi has done a reasonable job of managing her caucus, but has done a lousy job of just about everything else. If the Democrats lose ground in November, she will bear much of the blame. If they gain, DCCC Chairman Rahm Emanuel will get the credit. In either case, Pelosi will take note of the ever increasing grumbling among her Democratic colleagues and will shock the nation by doing the smart thing and moving on.

Prediction #7: November's Midterm election will be a status quo contest, with Democrats likely gaining slightly in both houses, but coming nowhere near retaking the majority in either.

Naturally, this is a prediction that could go awry depending on circumstances. If, for example, the Abramoff scandal mushrooms and turns out to be more politically damaging than I currently expect, the odds of significant Democratic gains go up. At the same time, if the world becomes more dangerous, Republicans would stand to gain. Events that would qualify as "more dangerous" could include a high profile confrontation with Iran over its nuclear weapons program or an attempt by Iran to take advantage of the enormous vacuum left in Israeli politics by the illness of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Otherwise, incumbency will rule the day and the balance of power will remain largely unchanged.

Prediction #7, Part II: Elizabeth Dole's career as a national political figure will mercifully come to an end.

As an incumbent Senator, Elizabeth Dole can probably stay in the Senate as long as she wishes and can therefore remain a nominally important Republican. But her career as national figure is finished. Over the course of the current election cycle, Dole has served as chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. She has, by almost any measure, done a lousy a job. The NRSC has considerably less cash on hand for next year's campaigns than does its Democratic counterpart (at last count, more than \$20 million less) and, more to the point, Dole has been about the most ineffectual candidate recruiter in recent memory.

At present, it looks likely that the Republicans will drop at least one net Senate seat, probably losing Pennsylvania (Santorum) and Rhode Island (Chaffee), but picking up Minnesota (open). If Dole had done her job well, the question now wouldn't be how deeply will the Democrats cut into the GOP majority, but rather how close can Republicans come to a veto-proof Senate.

Potentially vulnerable Democrats in Florida, Nebraska, North Dakota, West Virginia, Michigan, and Washington all appear well on their way to comfortable re-election. Each state had at least one exceptionally well-qualified prospective challenger. And each challenger took a pass. Put bluntly, Elizabeth Dole was not up to this job and the Republican Party will suffer as a result.

Dole has one last chance to gain some measure of redemption, and that will play out over the next couple of weeks. Montana Republican Senator Conrad Burns has been struggling in the polls of late and now appears set to become one of the few true casualties of the Abramoff scandal. Burns' connections to Abramoff were extensive, and it is believed by many insiders that the scandal has the very real potential to derail his reelection bid. In fact, a number of analysts have, over the past couple of weeks, moved his seat out of the "likely retention" category to "tossup." If Senator Dole has any persuasive ability at all, she will both help persuade Burns to retire and help coax Montana's lone House member, Denny Rehberg, into the race for the seat.

Other races to watch include New Jersey, where Tom Keane, Jr. gives the GOP its best chance at picking up a Senate seat in this deep-blue state in a great many election cycles; Tennessee, where 35-year-old, five-term Democratic Congressman Harold Ford will try to live down his family's corruption problems to win the seat being vacated by Majority Leader Bill Frist and become only the fourth black Senator since Reconstruction; and Maryland, where the aforementioned Michael Steele will also try to become only the fourth black Senator since Reconstruction and only the second black Republican Senator.

When all is said and done, I believe that the GOP will emerge from 2006 with only modest political momentum. It will manage to be perceived as merely the “stupider” party. This will be a positive development, given that there is still a war to be fought, but it is, at best, only marginally positive.

After more than a decade in the majority, Republicans have grown fat, complacent, and arrogant, and their majority party status is therefore at risk. At the same time, the Democrats continue to labor under

the delusion that the American people share their contempt for muscular foreign policy and their unspoken desire to see “imperialist” America put in its place. As a result, their status as a legitimate, viable political party is at risk.

Both parties are deeply flawed and both flaws are potentially quite damaging. The only question is which flaw will prove most salient to the public.

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