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THEY SAID IT

President Bush caught the essence of today's Democratic Party in a rather elegant double epigram: "Hindsight alone is not wisdom, And second-guessing is not a strategy."

I wouldn't be surprised to see that thought become the strategic negative communication theme for the Republican Party this campaign season. That is the trouble with being a rotten tomato-throwing member of the bleacher crowd. One may develop a small following amongst one's fellow complainers, but no large group of people are going to ask you to come out and lead the team.

Washington Times Editorial Page Editor and syndicated columnist Tony Blankley, "State of the Democratic Party," Feb.2, 2006.

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THE STATE OF THE CAMPAIGN.

It is nearly universally accepted among everyone involved in politics – participants and observers alike – that the 2006 midterm election will be perilous for the Republican Party. Some of the more optimistic Democrats believe that there is a very good chance that their party will rout the GOP, essentially reenacting the Republican Revolution of 1994 in reverse and recapturing both houses of Congress. Other, more objective observers are notably less optimistic about the Democrats' chances, but nevertheless believe that this will be at least a reasonably good year for the opposition party, one in which it should gain at least a few seats in both houses. And finally, even the overwhelming majority of those on the right are uneasy and discover new ominous signs and disquieting trends in almost every news cycle, concluding that a GOP that has already lost its way is now in serious jeopardy of losing its majority.

I won't pretend that there are no reasons for this virtually unanimous expectation of a Democratic victory. It's just that as far as I can tell, there are no *terribly good* reasons for this belief. Yes, in an absolute sense, the GOP has problems. But political fortunes don't rise and fall based on absolute assessments. They rise and fall based on *relative* assessments. And in this case, for all of its problems, the Republican Party is actually in pretty good shape, *relative* to the Democratic Party, which is to say that for every reason to expect the GOP to suffer setbacks this November, there are just as many reasons – and better reasons at that – to think the Democrats will actually do worse.

One of the most oft cited rationales for predicting a Republican rout is the ongoing Abramoff/DeLay/lobbying scandal, which, among other things, has provided the theme for House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's campaign to take back the House. Pelosi's constant harping on the Republican "culture of corruption" is her attempt to paint the entire GOP conference as ethically challenged and to suggest that the only way to end this sleaze is to replace Republicans with Democrats, who are, according to her, immune to enticements of mere graft.

Now, I don't mean to minimize the importance of the Abramoff scandal. There is no question that what went on between Abramoff and various members of Congress was disgraceful and indicative of corruption. And, as folks like the *Wall Street Journal's* John Fund have argued, the corruption exposed by the scandal points specifically to serious failings of the Republican majority over the last decade. Moreover, people much smarter and more politically savvy than Pelosi have taken up the scandal/corruption theme and argued that it holds the potential to cause the Republicans' undoing. But I, for one, doubt it. As I wrote in my '06 Forecast piece last month, "when the dust finally settles, I think it will be very difficult for the Democrats to parlay a handful of criminal acts into an effective campaign strategy . . ."

The principal problem with the presumption that the Abramoff mess will truly affect the balance of power in Congress is that it is contradicted by decades of empirical evidence, which demonstrates fairly conclusively that scandals that affect a limited number of individuals, that affect members *from both parties*, and that have not caused members of the majority party to retire *en masse* have little effect on the average voter. Nancy Pelosi and Howard Dean can prattle on as long and as angrily as they wish about how corrupt Republicans are, but the preponderance of historical evidence shows that when it comes time to pull the lever, *the average voter* will vote to return his or her Congressman to Washington, as long as that Congressman was not expressly involved in the scandal.

Given this, polling expert Jay Cost, a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago and the former operator of the "Horseface Blog," suggests that there are three scenarios under which the "culture of corruption" argument might stick and the Abramoff scandal might play a major role in this year's election. He writes that the scandal will have "a significant effect on the midterm elections if, and only if, any of the following come true":

- (1) Multiple members of Congress are somehow tied to criminal or notably unethical activity. It is not enough for the Democrats to charge a "culture of corruption"; nor will it be enough for them to castigate all members who accepted legal campaign contributions from Abramoff or his associates (especially in light of the fact that Democrats did as well). That will simply not cut it – at the end of the day, voters have a fairly accurate set of intuitions about the "culture" of Congress, and they already see their particular member as not being part of the problem . . .
- (2) The scandal induces a significant number of members of Congress to not seek reelection . . .
- (3) The scandal becomes amplified in such a way that elite Democratic would-be candidates decide to run for offices this year that they would not otherwise seek.

So far, there has been no evidence that any of these three scenarios is likely to play out, and it is getting fairly late in the game for scenarios two or three. This means that Pelosi's strategy rests entirely on the hope that the scandal is far more pervasive and serious than has yet been indicated. And while that is possible, I don't think I'd bet Mark's farm on it.

A second reason that many in the mainstream press and elsewhere on the left cite for their optimism about chances this fall for the Democrats is the considerable advantage that Dems appear to have on

those domestic issues that polls show “truly matter” to voters, namely health care and education. And there are indeed a number of sane and politically talented leaders left in the Democratic Party who have seen these polls and understand that domestic issues provide an opportunity for their party to make some headway. Among these I would include Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chairman and former Clinton White House aide Rahm Emanuel.

So naturally, folks like Emanuel have tried to focus the campaign on these concerns. Unfortunately for them, shifting the focus away from national security is far easier said than done, particularly since members of their own party are perpetually undermining them. It’s hard to keep the nation’s attention on the rising cost of prescription drugs, for example, when the public faces of the Democratic Party – John Kerry, Nancy Pelosi, Ted Kennedy, and Howard Dean, just to name a few – never miss an opportunity to get in front of a camera and say something utterly reprehensible and irresponsible about the war in Iraq or the armed forces or the “civil rights” of al Qaeda suspects.

But even if Emanuel, et al. could figure out a way to slap muzzles on these loudmouths and convince every other elected member of the party not to utter another word about Iraq, wiretaps, or impeachment, that probably wouldn’t help the Democrats communicate their message any more effectively. The fact is that when push comes to shove, and no matter what they tell pollsters, voters care deeply about national security. The following appeared in last Monday’s *Chicago Tribune* and was penned by the *Trib’s* national correspondent Jeff Zeleny. It puts into perspective the challenges facing Emanuel and others who would sooner steer the conversation away from defense and security matters:

The audience was supposed to be a gracious one. But Rep. Rahm Emanuel, the leader of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, found himself fielding spirited questions at a breakfast meeting late last week as he laid out his ideas on how Democrats could seize control of Congress from the Republicans. When the Illinois

congressman didn’t include national security in his top five talking points, a man raised his hand and his voice.

“Can I give you a piece of advice?” said Ford Huffman, a Columbus attorney. “They obviously believe it’s their winning issue. Why can’t we get out in front with it and say there’s not an issue about security? Every American believes in securing America.”

Emanuel tried to answer the question, asserting his eagerness to challenge the White House, but said he does not believe national security should be a political issue. As Emanuel spoke, Huffman turned his head and told those sitting around him: “It sounds like we are trying to dodge the issue. People are going to say the Democrats are being wussies.” . . .

“How do we get our message out?” asked Ann Hughes, a Columbus resident who said she is frustrated by the Iraq war and infuriated that the Bush administration is so skilled at guiding the country’s political debate. “It so easily gets portrayed that the Democratic Party is negative, and the issue agenda gets controlled by the Republicans.”

After Emanuel answered her question, he ticked through a list of five key themes he said the party should push this year: health care, education, energy independence, technology and fiscal discipline. It was national security, though, that his audience returned to again and again.

This wouldn’t be such a problem for Emanuel, of course, if his party didn’t come off as entirely unhinged whenever the matter comes up. When David Duke ran for governor of Louisiana as a Republican in 1991, the national party couldn’t run away from the guy fast enough, for obvious reasons, and even publicly disavowed any association with him and his campaign. It will be interesting to see if the national Democrats will have a similar reaction if and

when certifiable America-hater Cindy Sheehan makes good on her threat to mount a primary challenge to California Senator Diane Feinstein. I doubt they will. But the fact that there is even a question how the party will treat her is all the evidence anyone needs that Emanuel is right to want to stay as far away from discussions of national security as possible and that his inability to do so bodes ill for his party.

A third reason offered by prognosticators to expect that Democrats will do well this fall is the fact that, historically, midterm elections that take place in the sixth-year of a presidency are almost always damaging to the president's party. Any serious forecaster knows that of all reasons to expect Democratic success, this "surge-and-decline" theory is, by far, the weakest, yet it is cited almost as often as any of the others and frequently given more credence than more serious, more legitimate explanations.

The problem with this "historic" marker, which was first noted half-a-century ago by Angus Campbell, is that it is a mere statistical illusion. The aforementioned Jay Cost made this case last week as follows: "The sixth year slump is really quite ephemeral. It indicates no unique causal process – there is nothing special that induces a president in his sixth year to lose seats. The variation we see in on- and off-year elections can all be explained by the regular seat changes caused by changes in job approval and economic performance."

It is possible, of course, that Cost is too dismissive of the various surge-and-decline theories and that one of his critical variables, presidential popularity, actually affects (or is affected by) partisan motivation, which is the determinative variable in the original surge-and-decline theory. But even if Cost is too hasty in completely dismissing surge-and-decline, he is still probably correct in the conclusion that there will be no "sixth-year" effect this time around.

You see, even if the surge-and-decline theories are truly and reliably predictive, they rest on the presumption that the president's party will be less interested in the midterm election and thus less

motivated than in the previous (presidential) election. But as Bill Clinton and the Democrats proved in 1998, when they improbably picked up five seats in the House and pushed Newt Gingrich to resign his speakership, if a president is motivated enough, he can motivate his partisans and can thereby minimize, negate, or even reverse any expected "decline."

In 1998, Clinton was far more active politically than most second-term presidents because he was fighting for his political life against impeachment. And this unquestionably helped his party. In 2006, it appears likely that George Bush will be similarly active, since he will be fighting for his political legacy, which is much the same as fighting for his political life. And it is distinctly possible – even likely – that his partisans will be similarly motivated, ominous forecasts of Republican apathy and low turnout notwithstanding.

And this brings us to the big story from last week, namely the State of the Union address. After President Bush spoke, a number of his fellow conservatives ripped the address, attacking everything from delivery to content. Peggy Noonan complained that the president spoke "at" rather than "to" the public. Dozens of conservative and libertarian analysts and critics mocked the "addiction to oil" theme and the admittedly incoherent energy proposals. And some, including the inestimable Mark Melcher, were yet again bothered by the president's utopian rhetoric. But while these may well be valid criticisms of an ordinary State of the Union address, this speech shouldn't be graded using the usual scale, for it was not an ordinary State of the Union address. It was, in fact, a campaign speech, the first real campaign speech of the 2006 season.

A few weeks ago, in a much-publicized presentation, presidential advisor Karl Rove laid out for his fellow Republicans the themes for the 2006 campaign, telling them that the President would spend the year focusing on the strong economy, national security, and judges. With his address the other night, President Bush began the process of putting flesh on those bones. This process will continue this week with the administration's aggressive defense of its NSA wiretap

program in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Last week, the president challenged his opponents not to “retreat” from the difficult tasks facing the country. And with the likes of Ted Kennedy, Diane Feinstein, Chuck Schumer, and Pat Leahy using the hearings this week to accuse the administration of all sorts of nefariousness, the American people will be reminded yet again which party continues nevertheless to embrace retreat.

And that will be the goal of the administration all year long: to allow the Democrats, by their own actions, to show the American public that they are the party that favors retreat on a variety of fronts. As for the Democrats’ goal this year, no one can really say for sure what that will be, since the party itself has yet to articulate any strategic goals.

In fact, for a party that professes to be trying to recapture a Congressional majority, the Democrats have been very nonchalant about the whole campaign. I suspect that the attitude among Democrats is much the same as it was in 2004, when George Bush’s defeat was all but guaranteed and many in the party were lulled into complacency by the mainstream media echo chamber, which assured Democrats that all signs pointed unmistakably in their favor.

As of last week, George Bush and the Republicans are on the campaign trail. And not only are the Democrats slow out of the blocks, the majority of them don’t even realize that Bush and the GOP have started running. And while Bush and Rove have developed a detailed game plan and have set about implementing it, the Democrats’ long-promised strategic equivalent of the “Contract with America” has yet to materialize. Add all of that to the fact that the brilliant Dr. Dean has completely emptied the party’s coffers, leaving the Democratic National Committee on the verge of insolvency, and the idea of Democratic gains – even modest gains – begins to look less and less like the sure thing that we have all been led to believe it is.

I’m not yet ready to discard the conventional wisdom entirely and to predict GOP gains this November. But I do think it bears repeating that today’s Republicans should never be counted out of any contest, as long as their opponents are today’s Democrats. Indeed, it’s never too early, in my estimation, to begin to think about how the Democrats will go about blowing it, just as they did in the last election and the election before that.

THE STATE OF THE GLOBAL NANNIE STATE.

One problem with State of the Union speeches is that no one living when a State of the Union speech is given can really know what the state of the union is at that particular time, not even the President.

Woodrow Wilson provided a wonderful illustration of this on December 2, 1913, when he became the first president since George Washington to actually deliver a formal State of the Union address directly to Congress rather than simply sending a statement in compliance with the constitutional requirement to provide Congress, “from time to time,” with “information on the state of the union.” Among other things, he said the following:

The country, I am thankful to say, is at peace with all the world, and many happy manifestations multiply about us of a growing cordiality and sense of community of interest among the nations, *foreshadowing an age of settled peace and good will.* [emphasis added]

Less than a year later, World War I broke out in Europe, which set off a chain of events that would produce a period of global war and geopolitical conflict that would last for 76 years, until the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.

A second, related problem with State of the Union speeches is that they are given by Presidents, who are politicians, who have a large stake in painting a picture that is in keeping with the presidential agenda at the time. I know that this is a painfully obvious observation. But think about it. First, a president really can't know what the actual state of the union is, and second, if he did know, he wouldn't tell you, or at least he wouldn't tell you without adding a great deal of spin. If you really want some insight into the state of the union, you'd be better off going to the Moose Lodge in Mount Jackson and talking to the guy on the bar stool next to you, who has just finished his seventh beer and is about to order another one. He won't know any more about the actual state of the union than the President, but at least he won't sugar coat his version.

Which brings me to the third problem with State of the Union speeches, namely that in this day and age the very concept of a "state of the union" in the broad, all encompassing sense is so old fashioned that it is largely meaningless from a political standpoint. Why? Because virtually everyone in America now views the state of the union at any given time from the very narrow perspective of the state of his or her own personal life.

For a politician then, there are some 300 million separate and distinct "states of the union" at any given moment and they shift constantly based on an endless array of variables, from restless leg syndrome to disagreeable spouses to natural disasters. Now I know what your thinking. You're thinking that this has always been the case. But that's not true. There was a time when the question, "How are you doing?" was entirely different from the question "How do you think the country is doing?"

There was a time, many years ago, when someone could suffer an illness, be flooded out of his home, or burned out, or laid off from his job, or fired, or be run over by a train while snoozing on the tracks, or blinded by bad moonshine, or hit by a meteorite, and he would not have thought to blame it on the "lousy president" or the "state of the union."

Today, from cab drivers to construction workers to business executives to little old ladies in tennis shoes, reactions to state of the union speeches tend to involve some variation of the complaint that "the S.O.B. didn't say a damn thing about" . . . you name it, having a dumb kid, being "dissed" on the bus, or being restrained from some sort of disgusting activity by cultural norms. Today, if a person has a problem it is either the government's fault that it happened or the government's fault that it is not doing anything about it.

Of course, these complaints would not be relevant to the actual state of the union except that presidents today buy into this national narcissism, which makes State of the Union speeches less about the actual state of the union than about the selection of which group's troubles to assuage with promises of federal largess and presidential concern.

On December 6, 1923, Calvin Coolidge made the following comment in his State of the Union address, which appears to have been regarded as a commonplace at the time, but which is totally foreign to the modern day view of the government's role in the lives of American citizens.

There is an inescapable personal responsibility for the development of character, of industry, of thrift, and of self-control. These do not come from the Government, but from the people themselves. But the Government can and should always be expressive of steadfast determination, always vigilant, to maintain conditions under which these virtues are most likely to develop and secure recognition and reward. This is the American policy.

People have a personal responsibility for the development of character, of industry, of thrift, and of self-control? And the federal government's role is no more than to "maintain conditions" under which citizens can secure their own rewards by the strength of their own character?" Surely, he must have been jesting.

Today, the assumption that the government is responsible for the health and happiness of each and every citizen has become so much a part of “life in these United States,” to borrow a phrase from *Readers Digest*, that both political parties have essentially adopted this view as the heart and sole of their governing philosophy.

Indeed, while no president from either party has said so in any State of the Union speech, perhaps the single most important element in the long term state of the union for the past four decades has been the fact that this union is in the midst of one of the largest and most complex social engineering schemes that the world has ever witnessed. While not as ambitious as the utopian programs launched by the communist governments of Russia and China and the socialist states of Europe, the American plan to turn its government into a breast with 300 million nipples is definitely a triumph of optimism over experience.

Each year, tens of billions of dollars, including billions of dollars of borrowed money, shuffle from individual to individual, across generational lines, from private organizations to public organizations and back again, all under the watchful eye of the federal government, and all in pursuit of an elaborate plan designed specifically to help people escape from what Coolidge described as the “inescapable personal responsibility for the development of character, of industry, of thrift, and of self-control” and to place this responsibility directly in the hands of the federal government.

Some Republicans seem dimly aware of the stakes involved, and in tribute to this awareness pay occasional lip service to the twin concepts of fiscal restraint and limited government. But no one takes them seriously, least of all President Bush, who has presided over an absolutely amazing expansion of both the cost and the reach of the federal behemoth during his five years in the White House, including passage of the largest new entitlement program since the days of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

But more importantly, in the past few years this “conservative” president has been easing toward the goal of adding an unbelievably costly and entirely new responsibility to the already heavy burden that the American nanny state carries. With no direct awareness by the press or the public, the President has slowly been adding 26 million Iraqis and 25 million Afghans to the growing list of individuals whose happiness is now considered either the full or partial responsibility of the U.S. government.

In what may be one of the most astonishing claims ever made by a sitting president, President Bush now routinely implies that future generations of Americans cannot be safe and secure in their homes unless the United States spends billions upon billions of dollars to improve the daily lives of the citizens of these two nations, one of which sits astride some of the largest oil deposits in the world and the other diligently works to regain its position as the largest global producer of opium poppies.

The president’s theory is that nations such as these are breeding grounds for terrorism and that the way to confront this problem is to turn all such nations into freedom loving democracies. Indeed, in the fifth paragraph of his State of the Union address last week, President Bush proclaimed that the “long term goal” of America is “the end of tyranny in our world.” And he noted that “in reality, the future security of America” depends on the success of this project. He explains this extraordinary observation this way.

Dictatorships shelter terrorists, and feed resentment and radicalism, and seek weapons of mass destruction. Democracies replace resentment with hope, respect the rights of their citizens and their neighbors, and join the fight against terror. Every step toward freedom in the world makes our country safer -- so we will act boldly in freedom’s cause.

Now one could advance many arguments on behalf of the belief that this is a fool’s mission. Among other things, there is a concept called original sin. This is,

of course, considered little more than a quaint story in the post-modern world. Yet, it is also true, as C.K. Chesterton once pointed out, that original sin is the one Christian teaching for which there has always been abundant empirical evidence. In any case, the “poetic truth,” as Auden termed it, that evil is natural to human nature would seem to discourage a nation from relying on the global elimination of tyranny as a principal element in its long-term plan for assuring national security.

But even if the President was taking what might be called poetic license when he essentially asserted that America can only be secure if it can bring on that future time when the wolf and the lamb will feed together, this project is still an ambitious and costly one. Indeed, already tens of billions of dollars have been and are in the process of being committed to the effort to develop a form of government in Iraq and Afghanistan that is so rare that it has no name, but might, I think, fairly be called ruderal democracy.

Only time will tell whether these experiments in nation building will be successful in making Americans safer for generations to come. But two things are already clear.

The first is that another 50 million people formally gained the right last week to complain that the United States is not doing enough to help them to escape from the inescapable burden of personal responsibility, which means that their well being is now considered a part of the equation by which future presidents will determine the state of the American union.

And second, if America’s long-term security is no longer dependent on the strength of its military but on its ability to convert enemy nations to tranquil islands for liberty loving democrats, then future State of the Union addresses are going to become not only more interesting but unbelievably more depressing.

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