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THEY SAID IT

The discipline, respect for law, and social solidarity of the patrician orders gave way to a humane and easy tolerance. Philosophy took the place of religion. Equality led to license. There was dispersion of private interests and decline of public spirit. Birth was first displaced by wealth as the sign of fitness to rule, since to acquire or retain it implied industry, thrift, and foresight. But in time even the property qualification was swept away, and political power was extended to those who lacked the leisure or the will to exercise it wisely. The meanest citizen could press the public force into the service of his appetites and whims, or sell his vote to the highest bidder among faction leaders and demagogues. The external symptoms of the process of disintegration were abated by the rise of bureaucratic monarchies, for the most part even more ‘humane’ than the democracies, yet relieving nobles and plebeians alike of public responsibility.

Introduction by Max Harold Fisch to *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, Cornell University Press, 1944, describing Vico’s portrayal of the third and final stage in the cycles of a civilization.

THE GATHERING STORM.

I have a bad cold, a bad cough, and a bad sore throat, and I don’t feel good. I know that I should write, “I don’t feel well.” But I feel lousy like I used to when I was a little kid and got sick and would tell my mother, “I don’t feel good.” So it just seems right to say, “I don’t feel good.”

Naturally I am in a bad mood. So this is going to be short. Got that? Furthermore, it is going to be pessimistic. I mean, this is a perfect time to vent about some of things I see that I don’t like and to whine about some of the things that worry me right now. I mean, I couldn’t do justice to a task like that if I felt well. Or good. Or whatever. Could I? But before I begin this exercise, I would like to make the following disclaimer, which will make me feel better when I read it over sometime when I feel good, or well.

I am optimistic about my country and I always have been. I have never doubted that the United States will continue to be the dominant and most successful nation in the world for decades to come. I believed this throughout the Cold War when many folks on the left argued that the best outcome that America could expect in the war against Soviet totalitarianism was a draw. I believed it several decades ago when some economists

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were predicting that the future would belong to Japan. And I believe it now when many people are convinced that China will be the dominant global power in the 21st century.

My optimism is not based on the belief that the United States is divinely blessed. This is a comforting thought, but it comes awfully close, in my opinion, to the hubristic notion that one can know God's plan. Nor is my optimism based on the chauvinistic conviction that the United States is always right. Error free governance is not in the nature of man. My optimism is based on the proposition that no other nation does the things that are necessary to maintain a civilized and prosperous existence as well as the United States does them, even when the United States is doing them poorly. From Europe, to Russia, to Latin America and Africa, and to the angry world of Islam, I see ignorance, incompetence, and intellectual duplicity that far exceed the ignorance, incompetence, and intellectual duplicity that exist in America today.

Having said that, I now must repeat what I said above, namely that I see a lot of things going on right now in this country that I don't like, that worry me a great deal, which explains the above "They Said It" quote by Vico.

Among the thoughts that this brilliant man put forth in his seminal work, *The New Science*, which was published in 1725, was an entirely new idea at the time, namely that nations rise and fall in patterns that are governed by providence. There is some question as to whether he actually believed that providence played the decisive role in this progression or whether he added that twist in an effort to placate Church authorities in Naples who were particularly watchful during that time for what might be considered heretical notions. In any case, Vico defined three distinct cycles or ages through which he determined that all human societies progress.

The first is the primitive stage, which he called the "age of gods," when men's predatorial instincts are held in check by their fear of supernatural powers, and their sense of order emanates from their religious convictions.

Vico called the second cycle the "age of heroes." During this period, men join together in alliances for mutual protection and profit. Oligarchies are established through these alliances and society is divided between patrician rulers and plebeians. The patricians fight to keep society unchanged. The plebeians constantly seek to enhance their own power at the expense of the ruling elite.

Finally, there comes the "age of men." This stage develops when the patricians' hold on society gives way to the demands of the plebeians. It is also the age in which things fall apart. Order and discipline collapse. Conflicts develop between classes. This cycle ends when the weakened society is either defeated by another power or simply disintegrates, or both. Barbarism follows and the cycle is repeated.

I am constantly seeing signs that the United States is suffering from the maladies described by Vico. I mean, a lack of discipline, respect for law, and social solidarity? Religion giving ground to philosophy? A decline in public spirit? Political power in the hands of those who can't exercise it wisely? Selling votes to the highest bidder? Talk about Nostradamus. Vico makes that dude look like a five-cent fortune telling machine on the boardwalk in Atlantic City.

I am not concerned about Vico's prediction that this means that the good old U.S. of A is about to be defeated by another power or that it will disintegrate. But the fact that even a casual reader can find startlingly close parallels between his signs of social decay and life in these United States today has to make one pause and wonder whether this nation is going to be up to the challenges that lie ahead.

If this sounds like a stretch, let me move on to concrete examples of things that concern me about this nation's readiness to face the future. I am troubled by the state of the American news media. I don't have a problem with the press being biased. As far as I'm concerned there is no reason to own a printing press if you don't have an opinion you would like to advertise. And the same goes for owning a television network. Or having a blog, for that matter. Bias is natural and

good. It stimulates the discussion that is necessary for a democracy to work. The *New York Times* is a liberal paper. The *Washington Times* reflects the conservative viewpoint. Fine.

The problem as I see it is that the mainstream news media today makes no attempt to differentiate between news and opinion, or to offer opinions with the kind of moderation that makes debate useful rather than destructive. Every story is spun and spun and spun and spun again. The public loves it, of course. People all over the country who couldn't tell you the century in which the Civil War was fought or find Afghanistan on a map have opinions on everything from the evils of big government, to global warming, to whether the executives at Halliburton belong in jail, to why the levees collapsed in New Orleans.

It is a world filled with celebrity politicians, celebrity pundits, celebrity "experts," and grand televised debates between and among them every night, night after night; debates that would put Disraeli and Burke and Lincoln and Douglas and even Daniel Webster to shame. Each night the same combatants line up at dinnertime and do battle for the edification of their loyal fans, like jai-alai players in Florida. Or better yet, like the Vikings vision of heaven as described by Arnold.

And from their beds the Heroes rose, and donn'd
Their arms, and led their horses from the stall,
And mounted them, and in Valhalla's court
Were rang'd; and then the daily fray began.
And all day long they there are hack'd and hewn
'Mid dust, and groans, and limbs lopp'd off, and
blood;
But all at night return to Odin's hall
Woundless and fresh: such lot is theirs in Heaven.

Why do I worry about this? Because the time will come, and maybe soon, when some president is going to need to send a serious message to the American people that he is about to do something momentous and that he needs their full support and their trust. And the press, which will be tasked to explain the circumstances behind this message and to rally

support for it, will be unable to perform the task properly. They'll spin it. Because that's what they do. And because no one among them and none of the "experts" that tag along with them are viewed by the public as anything other than a toady for some politician or party, the urgency and even the content of the message will be muddled and the country will suffer for it.

Somewhere during the past several decades this nation lost something important when it comes to the press and the media, something that is difficult to define exactly. But the definition, if I were smart enough to write it, would contain words like integrity, wisdom, intellectual honesty, a sense of national interest, trustworthiness, common sense, and yes, prudence.

And speaking of having lost something important, I am worried about the state of the Democratic Party. As a politician, President Bush is fair game. But there are unwritten yet well-recognized rules to the game, which are there to prevent America's enemies from gaining an advantage due to the fact that this is a free and open society in which the public is encouraged to participate. And the Democratic Party is making no attempt to convince its members to follow these rules. Indeed, the Chairman of the party and its last two presidential candidates openly scorn them.

Why do I worry about this? Because the time is likely to come when the President is going to have to make a decision in the ongoing war against militant Islam that will determine not only the outcome but how long it will last and how many will die. This decision may not be as momentous as Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima or President Kennedy's decision to risk a nuclear war with Russia. But it will be a big decision, nevertheless, and he will have the right, as all presidents before him have had, including Truman and Kennedy, to expect the opposition party to support this decision once it is made, whether they agree with it or not. My worry is that he won't get the support. I worry that no matter what decision he makes, the knee-jerk reaction of the Democratic Party leadership will be to criticize, and that the media will join in, and the country will suffer for it.

Somewhere during the past several decades this nation has lost something important when it comes to the old saw about politics stopping at the borders. This something is difficult to define exactly. But the definition, if I were smart enough to write it, would contain words like integrity, wisdom, intellectual honesty, a sense of national interest, trustworthiness, common sense, and yes, prudence.

Which brings me to my really big specific concern, which, big surprise, is related to the aforementioned concerns. And that is that I think the time is fast approaching when President Bush will have to decide what to do about Iran's nuclear weapons program. From all appearances, the Iranians have no intention of backing down, which means that the United States and Israel must both back down or there is going to be war with Iran.

President Bush may choose to rely on diplomacy and on his newly announced plans to "advance the cause of freedom in Iran" with a \$75 million program to broadcast messages of freedom into Iran via the National Endowment for Democracy and various independent Farsi language broadcasters. A short time ago, I would have discounted this possibility. But the recent announcement of this broadcast initiative coupled with Assistant Secretary of State Steve Rademacher's recent seemingly firm promise that the United States would not use military power against Iran's nuclear facilities, have made me wonder about the extent of Bush's commitment to deny Iran nuclear weapons.

Yet, it could be that the administration is simply going through the motions of exhausting all possible means of negotiating a peaceful resolution to the stand off before it prepares for a military attack. And if this is the case, it will be absolutely essential to convince Iran and the rest of the world, including China and Russia, that the people of the United States, Democrats included, will be firmly committed to the action if it occurs.

And the media must be willing to make this case to the world, with no equivocating or cutesy second-guessing, because only if the world is absolutely convinced that President Bush will attack if necessary and that the American public will stand behind him 100% if he does, is there a likelihood that Iran will back down before the fighting starts. And if it doesn't back down, and the fighting does begin, then the best hope for a quick and decisive victory is if the American people stand united behind the decision to go to war. My worry is that the Democrats and the press will do all they can to prevent this. And I will be presented with another sign of Vico's prescience.

UNBLESSSED GRIDLOCK.

One of the principal critiques of the Bush foreign policy crowd is that they tend to be more than just a little "Utopian." The President, his former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and the rest of the administration's brain trust believe in fighting terrorism, in part, by husbanding the spread of democracy in the Muslims world. And this, we are told, is naïve, unrealistically optimistic, and hopelessly "Wilsonian."

Certainly, there is some wisdom in this criticism. The idea that democracy can simply be imposed on a nation that has no history of representative government is questionable at best. As more than one commentator has noted, democracy is a process, not an event. And the process of fomenting representative government in a culture with only limited exposure to the ideas and principles necessary to sustain such a thing is truly daunting and may, in the end, prove impossible. Similar concerns can, of course, be raised with regard to the domestic side of the Bush agenda as well. For starters, the proposition that "when people hurt, government must help" is not simply anti-conservative, but impractical to say the least.

The problem with this criticism of the Bush administration, though, is that the overwhelming majority of it comes from people who are unable or unwilling to explain realistically how things might be done differently, or better. It is no secret that this has been a problem on the political left for some time. But the fact is that the lefties are hardly alone in having trouble articulating an alternative vision. Bush may be naïve and unrealistic, but for the most part, so are his detractors – those on the left, on the right, and in the middle.

The result is that while President Bush has some firm ideas of how the nation should be governed, he has lost the backing of large swaths of the political establishment, which makes it difficult for him to carry out his plans. At the same time, the establishment offers no coherent alternative, meaning that the nation is gridlocked. During much of the last decade, Mark and I described the gridlock that gripped Congress as “blessed,” in reference to the fact that it acted as a check on government spending. But the gridlock that grips the nation today is hardly blessed, in that it threatens to cripple the government at a time when swift and decisive action may literally mean the difference between life and death.

Two weeks ago, movement conservatives held their annual get together in Washington under the auspices of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), and by all accounts, the featured speakers and panelists were more energized than they have been in a long time. Among the participants were columnists George Will, Robert Novak, and Ann Coulter; Senators George Allen and Mitch McConnell (likely the next Senate Majority Leader); current Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert; former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich; Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman; Americans for Tax Reform President Grover Norquist; and Congressmen Tom Tancredo and Mike Pence, the chairman of the conservative Republican Study Committee.

While the presentations covered a variety of subjects, one of the themes that emerged during the conference, according to those who attended, was the need to rebuild the conservative movement after years of neglect, which was blamed principally on George W. Bush. *New York Post* columnist Ryan Sager wrote that at CPAC, “a clear frontrunner emerged for the 2008 Republican primary: Ronald Wilson Reagan.” “Everyone,” Sager continued, “wants to be Reagan’s heir, it seems. Absolutely no one wants to be George W. Bush’s – at least when it comes to domestic policy.”

According to Sager, Colorado Congressman Tancredo, a man who has made opposition to immigration his signature issue, declared that “the president . . . is out of step with his party” and also “questioned whether the Republican Party under Bush stands for anything at all anymore.” And this, Sager notes, was just the first panel of the conference. Things went downhill for Bush from there. Before all was said and done, everyone from Pence to George Allen, whom Sager described as “the presumed presidential candidate most closely affiliated with Bush-style conservatism” had taken their shots at Bush’s conservatism and the “out of control” federal spending and “political expediency” that this conservatism has bred.

Sager didn’t say how his fellow conservative columnist George Will treated the President in his remarks to CPAC. But based on what Will wrote shortly after the conference ended, I think we can guess. In last Thursday’s column, Will officially rejoined the camp of the Bash-Bush-o-cons, taking a swipe at the administration for, of all things, holding Congress in too low a regard. Leaving the domestic scene, Will chose to attack the Bush administration’s foreign policy, claiming that it too was insufficiently conservative. To wit:

[T]errorism is not the only new danger of this era. Another is the administration’s argument that because the president is commander in chief, he is the “sole organ for the nation in foreign affairs . . .” The administration, in which mere obduracy sometimes serves as political

philosophy, pushes the limits of assertion while disdaining collaboration. This faux toughness is folly, given that the Supreme Court, when rejecting President Truman's claim that his inherent powers as commander in chief allowed him to seize steel mills during the Korean War, held that presidential authority is weakest when it clashes with Congress.

Immediately after 9/11, the president rightly did what he thought the emergency required, and rightly thought that the 1978 law was inadequate to new threats posed by a new kind of enemy using new technologies of communication. Arguably he should have begun surveillance of domestic-to-domestic calls – the kind the 9/11 terrorists made.

But 53 months later, Congress should make all necessary actions lawful by authorizing the president to take those actions, with suitable supervision. It should do so with language that does not stigmatize what he has been doing, but that implicitly refutes the doctrine that the authorization is superfluous.

The definitive substantive take down of Will's diatribe against Bush's "monarchical doctrine" was penned almost immediately by Andrew McCarthy, the former federal prosecutor who handled the first World Trade Center bombings. Though he considers himself a "reverent admirer" of Will's, McCarthy nevertheless picks Will's column apart, calling it "an embarrassing magpie of hyperbole and error" and labeling Will's reasoning "so outlandish as to defy measure."

I will defer to McCarthy on substance, but even if Will were not completely "counterfactual" in his assertions, his piece would stand out as a case study in ridiculousness. To suggest, as Will does, that Congress could and should be entrusted with every minute detail of the execution of foreign policy and national security is absurd. But even more mind-boggling is his declaration that it is "implausible" to believe that "in

the months after 9/11, Congress would have refused to revise the 1978 law in ways that would authorize, with some supervision, NSA surveillance that, even in today's more contentious climate, most serious people consider conducive to national security."

One wonders if Will ever met any of the 535 members of the current Congress? Does he have any idea how many of them think they could, should, or will be president someday and therefore know better than this president what is best for the country? Has he paid any attention to any of the foreign policy debates over the last four-and-a-half years, and has he seen how Bush's opponents – both on his left and his right – politicize everything, hoping to score partisan or intra-partisan points for every takedown of the President? Does he honestly not know that the members of the Senate's supercilious, publicity hungry contingent would use the debate over the issue as an opportunity to earn a few invitations to the Sunday morning talk shows to jabber about how "concerned" they are about Bush's "overreach"?

There may have been a time in our nation's history when the representatives of the people would honestly and earnestly examine national security issues and arrive at their decisions without regard for political considerations, but I doubt it. And even if such a time once existed, it certainly doesn't any longer.

Perhaps, in a perfect world, Will would be right and Bush et al. would wisely ask for Congress's sanction of the surveillance program. But this is hardly a perfect world. And that's the point. For all the chatter about how Bush is naïve and unrealistically optimistic, Will proves that he too can be incredibly naïve. And if Bush were to take his advice, it would almost certainly prove disastrous.

The very same thing can be said about the rest of the conservative critics who crawled out of the woodwork to lambaste the President at CPAC. In a perfect world, Tom Tancredo would be able to introduce a bill that would require the Army to patrol the Mexican border and would mandate immediate deportation of any illegal immigrants found in the country.

And the problem of illegal immigration would be solved. But in the real world, the military has prior commitments, and such a crackdown on illegals would be easily demagogued by the Democrats, resulting in a monstrous backlash against the GOP by Hispanic voters, particularly if the action were sold as part of the “clash of civilizations” as Tancredo has said he believes it is. In the end, the GOP would stand to lose a number of political offices, particularly in states like Tancredo’s Colorado, and the immigration problems would get worse.

In a perfect world, the GOP could, as Mike Pence suggests, stop doing what is politically expedient, embrace conservative principals wholeheartedly, and therefore slash federal spending. And in the real world, this too would result in a hefty backlash against Republicans that would almost certainly see them relegated once again to the minority, and the spending problems would get worse.

Don’t get me wrong, I agree with Pence about a number of things and certainly believe that George Bush has been insufficiently conservative both in action and in philosophy. I think Jonah Goldberg summed it up nicely the other day, suggesting that “Bush has done real violence to the principle of limited government with all of his talk about how the government has to move when someone is hurting and his aim to leave no child behind.”

All of that notwithstanding, the fact of the matter is that it is incredibly naïve to believe that the public would embrace a Republican Party that is truly and aggressively conservative. Take, for one example, the issue of “out of control” spending. The overwhelming threat with regard to public spending comes, of course, from entitlements. And does anyone recall what happened to George Bush when he decided to try to address the entitlement issue through reform of the Social Security system? If memory serves, he not only got his head handed to him but was pushed into a public approval death-spiral. Moreover, I don’t recall exactly that the “real” conservatives in either the Republican-controlled House or the Republican-controlled Senate did much to help him out.

The bottom line is that if conservatives want to govern by conservative principles, they need first to make their case to the electorate. Simply to sit and complain that Bush has done this and Bush has done that and has somehow been solely responsible for leading conservatives into the ideological wilderness is both foolish and dangerous. Glenn Reynolds (a.k.a. Instapundit) addressed the foolish component of this bellyaching yesterday, writing:

[R]emind me again, who was the conservative who had a decent shot at the Republican nomination in 2000? John McCain? And if the Republicans had nominated a true-blue conservative, rather than a “compassionate conservative,” in 2000 would he have won?

As a libertarian myself, I’d love to see the nation run under small-government principles (which is part of what people are talking about here), but I also recognize that there’s no very substantial base of electoral support for that . . .

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There are two components to the danger that is posed by the Republican rebellion against President Bush. The first is, in a cosmic sense, rather minor. But decades of empirical evidence demonstrates rather conclusively that presidential approval has a significant and causative impact on the performance of the president’s party in midterm elections. And if Republicans truly believe that they’d be better off if they were more ideologically pure and less “politically expedient,” all they need to do is keep yammering and they’ll soon get the chance to be the ideologically pure minority party.

And if the GOP were to be relegated to the minority, that would mean a handful of different things. First, it would mean that John Conyers, one of the most venomous of the Bush-hating Democrats and a public

advocate of impeaching the President, would become Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, thereby providing him the opportunity to start impeachment proceedings. It would also mean that David Obey would become Chairman of the Appropriations Committee and John Spratt would become Chairman of the Budget Committee. And between the two of them, they could wreak havoc on the administration's budget priorities, including the appropriation of funds to support the "War on Terror" and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And that brings us to the second and more important component of the danger posed by Republican backbiting. On the off chance that these guys have forgotten, there's a war on, and in order to win it, the President is going to need a couple of things. First, he's going to need support from Congress. Since the Democrats are unlikely to provide any such support, the burden falls to Republicans. This will be especially so if, over the course of the next several months, the conflict with Iran continues to escalate.

Iran is building a nuclear bomb. This we know. It is likely that at some point the United States is going to have to address the issue. If the President is going to be able effectively to convince the American public of the necessity of his actions, whatever they may be, then he'll probably need the support of more than just John McCain.

This doesn't mean that the rest of the Republicans need necessarily to support the president blindly and to submit to his will unquestioningly, but it does mean that they need to be more serious. Throughout the war on terror, Bush has been criticized roundly both for embarking on utopian adventures and for not listening to alternative opinions. But right now, there are no serious alternative opinions.

The liberal Democrats are, to put it mildly, unserious, as are the paleo- and realist conservatives. Some mainstream Democrats (say, for example, Joseph Lieberman) support the President, but most, are themselves incredibly naïve, believing that their party might somehow, someday offer a responsible alternative vision, but never quite reconciling that hope with the fact that the party's base is firmly entrenched in the unserious camp. James Webb, a former Marine officer and President Reagan's Secretary of the Navy, is running for Senate in Virginia as a Democrat. Is he really naïve enough to believe that if elected his new party won't do its very best to muzzle him when he tries to advocate greater defense spending and greater military readiness?

If there is to be any serious debate about the life-and-death issues facing the nation today, it will have to take place between the President and the members of his own party. Yet while the President is allegedly naïve for wanting to promote liberty throughout the world, his fellow Republicans are no better, apparently believing that Congress can and should get involved in every niggling detail of national defense and that the world would be a better place if we simply threw out all the illegal immigrants and slashed spending. Who exactly is naïve here?

In the meantime, when the Iranians finally get their bomb and wipe Israel off the map, at least the Republicans in Congress will be able to say that they fought the good fight against illegal immigrants and rising deficits. What a proud moment that will be.

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