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THEY SAID IT

He was met even now
As mad as the vexed sea; singing aloud;
Crowned with rank fumitor and furrow weeds,
With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn.

--William Shakespeare, "King Lear," Act.4, Scene 4.

In this Issue

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad,
Mad, Mad World.

IT'S A MAD, MAD, MAD, MAD, MAD, MAD WORLD.

Over the last several weeks, there has been a great deal of discussion in various Washington and media circles about the mental impairments that seem to have gripped the Nation's Capital at this particularly sensitive time in history. Everywhere one looks these days, it seems that someone somewhere is suggesting that someone else is on the verge of going off the proverbial deep end. In fact, last Friday, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* carried not one, but two such pieces, one by the editorial board and one by columnist and board member Daniel Henninger.

Regular readers will note that we have been far out ahead of this parade for a very long time, having written numerous pieces over the past three years around the tagline of the Democrats' "descent into madness." And a couple of weeks ago, we even noted that some symptoms of this illness appear to have spread across the aisle to Congressional Republicans and their supporters as well.

Yet, in our wildest dreams, we never expected things to become as crazy as they have of late. Our focus has been on political foolishness and tone deafness, of the kind that threatens politicians and political parties. But within the past few weeks, we have come to see a very different kind of madness, not the kind that demonstrates poor or amusing political judgment or even ideological exhaustion, but the kind that appears to involve some sort of systemic breakdown of a kind that may well serve as a prelude to more serious, fundamental social, economic, and political problems.

The practical manifestation of this madness in the near term appears to be a determined effort by the mainstream press and politicians of both parties to throw aside all considerations of good sense, prudence, patriotism, and even honesty in a strange, almost surreal effort to pile on a president during a time of war, regardless of the ramifications to the nation. It goes without saying that such behavior is potentially

damaging, given the seriousness of the times. But beyond the current political horizon, there are likely to be long-term effects that are difficult to forecast but which will almost certainly be negative.

The *Wall Street Journal's* in-house editorial last Friday dealt specifically with the *Associated Press's* release of that “damning” tape of an administration briefing just prior to Hurricane Katrina making landfall. As the editorial board noted, the Democrats’ once again allowed their hatred of President Bush to get the best of them and rushed to get in front of the cameras as soon as the tape’s existence became known, never stopping to determine whether or not the “evidence” on the tape actually showed anything. It did not, of course – as evinced by the AP’s feeble correction issued conveniently enough at 7:00 last Friday evening – and again, the Democrats were seen whooping and hollering about exactly nothing, driven to ridiculousness by their irrationality and emotionality.

But while the Democrats were busy making fools of themselves, the rest of Washington appeared determined not to let them do so alone, lending credence to the notion that the political realm had gone mad, or as Henninger put it, that the entirety of Washington had been gripped by “mass psychosis.”

For starters, it is worth noting that it would have been difficult for the Democrats to have made themselves look so preposterous if they had not had help. And, as usual, the mainstream media played the role of willing accomplice.

In fact, the attempt by the AP to create news and controversy where none existed was only the beginning of a week in which it seemed that every media outlet in the country – this country, that is – was bound and determined to make it appear as if Iraq had fallen into civil war or was about to. The *Washington Post* released a body count of 1,300 dead Iraqis in a week’s worth of sectarian violence, despite the fact that the Iraqi government had determined that the *Post's* numbers were inflated roughly four-fold. The *New York Times* reported that negotiations to form a governing coalition had fallen into “ruins,”

thereby suggesting that the much-ballyhooed election last December had been for naught and that the dream of a democratic Iraq had been shattered. In fact, it seemed more accurate to say that The *New York Times's* collective nose for news had been incapacitated by the stench of willful ignorance, since negotiations had merely been suspended, only to resume 48 hours later.

Meanwhile, American military leaders, Iraqi government and religious leaders, Iraqi media, and Americans on the ground in Baghdad spent the week trying to tell anyone who would listen that the sectarian violence was exaggerated in the Western press and, in reality, stood as a testament to the willingness of most religious leaders to put calm and country above ancient hatreds. But no one, it seemed, would listen. By the middle of last week, Retired Army Colonel and columnist Ralph Peters, who is in Baghdad, felt obliged to tell the American people, “You are being lied to. By elements in the media determined that Iraq must fail.”

And you’ll note that all of this took place just two weeks after the White House press corps put on such a bizarre performance in the aftermath of Vice President Cheney’s hunting accident that it prompted Renana Brooks, a clinical psychologist practicing in Washington, to speculate that the illustrious members of this exclusive club are suffering from an entirely new psychological condition, something she described as “White House reporter syndrome,” which she equated to “post-traumatic stress.”

As if they needed any help, mainstream media types were assisted in their effort to appear unfair, unbalanced, and unhinged by their partners in the field of public opinion polling. Early last week, CBS News released a poll showing that President Bush’s approval rating had fallen to 34%, a new low for him. Many of the President’s supporters were quick to point out that the CBS survey was ridiculously over weighted with Democratic respondents and was therefore hardly an accurate depiction of the public’s sentiment. Indeed, the poll put the President’s approval at five or more points lower than the national average, which is a significant difference, to say the least. Of course,

given CBS News's well-earned reputation for ignoring the line between truth and fiction, the poll was probably not all that dreadful. And it looked even less so as the week wore on and more and more play was given to another poll, this one conducted by onetime polling all-star John Zogby, who quite possibly set a new low for hack polls taken by formerly respected operations.

By the middle of last week, it was clear that Zogby, who was once considered among the most accurate pollsters in the nation, was continuing his own long descent into madness. Zogby's poll, which was widely heralded as further evidence that the Bush policy in Iraq has failed, purported to show that 72% of soldiers serving in Iraq believe that the war should be ended and troops should leave the country within the next 10 months. To call this poll and its author a mess might well be the understatement of the year.

Begin with the fact that Zogby is an admitted Democrat who is generally opposed to President Bush and his policies in the Middle East. Add to that the idea that his brother is the former campaign manager for Jesse Jackson's presidential runs and an aggressive and outspoken "anti-Zionist" with ties to some unsavory characters in the Middle East. And finally, mix in the fact that this poll, such as it was, was conducted in conjunction with the Center for Peace and Global Studies at LeMoyne College, which helped develop the questions, and was paid for by a "a wealthy war opponent who [Zogby] would not name." Clearly, Zogby was not off to an auspicious start. And things only got worse from there.

Normally when confronted with a poll that finds results completely at odds with the conventional wisdom, as the Zogby poll did, analysts would check the survey's methodology to ensure that nothing was amiss. In this case, that was impossible, since Zogby refused to disclose any information about his methodology, except to say that disclosing his methodology would endanger those who conducted the poll. Additionally, the poll found wildly conflicting results, which obviously were not played up in either Zogby's write-up or the press accounts of the survey, and results that are flatly contradicted by other

sources.

All things considered, then, John Zogby, who sacrificed much of his reputation with his questionable attempts to convince the American people that John Kerry would win two years ago, continues to sink lower and lower and to damage what's left of his credibility ore and more. Unfortunately, some in the media continue to pretend that his reputation remains intact, thus further complicating an already complicated mess. Outside observers could be forgiven for wondering who appears madder, the pollster who will apparently not let the standards and practices of his profession prevent him from doing whatever he can to discredit a war he apparently opposes or the media that buys what he is selling unquestioningly.

Given the ridiculousness displayed by the likes of Zogby, the AP, and a host of others in mainstream media, it would seem unlikely that anyone could be even more ridiculous. But such a conclusion would have to ignore Congressional Republicans' collective ability to exceed expectations where preposterousness is concerned. Without question, the award for the most potentially insane political player of the week goes, once again, to Congressional Republicans, who appear more and more determined to relegate themselves back to the minority by distancing themselves from the President, who, whether they like it or not, is the only person in their party who has the capability of keeping the public at least nominally interested in retaining them. Believe it or not, Republicans in Congress are not merely unpopular, but are far more unpopular even than the President from whom they are running away on everything from the Dubai Ports World deal to a handful of other national security and homeland security-related issues.

There's no question that the ports issue is a touchy one, and Congress has both a right and a responsibility to examine the deal skeptically. But the Congressional Republican reaction to the question has been crass and opportunistic, to put it mildly, and seems bound to hurt them politically and to strengthen the hand of the people who oppose them and everything they purport to believe in.

Republican members may think they're helping themselves by getting away from the President on an unpopular issue, but the evidence suggests that their retreat was won them few friends and admirers. Pollster Kellyanne Conway's analysis of the non-headline-generating portions of aforementioned CBS poll last week is something that all Republican members would do well to read. For while there is no question that President Bush has problems, the poll found not only that his approval rating is notably better than that of the Congress as a whole, but his approval among Republicans is three times as high as Congress's. Conway puts it thusly:

The most devastating news early in the poll is the anemic approval ratings offered Congress. At 28% approval and 68% disapproval, Congress has managed to attract rare tripartisan agreement: Democrats, Independents and Republicans all agree that they are sleeping at the switch. *Republicans actually disapprove of the GOP-controlled Congress' performance more than Democrats do!* [Emphasis in original.] Could it be that Republicans are angry at members of their own party for fiscal irresponsibility, lack of vision and nerve on Social Security or tax reform, and that Democrats are grateful for the gift of GOP inertia?

These data are sobering for Members of Congress too quick to play the ABC (Abramoff, Bush, Clinton) blame game when struggling to find a reason for the public's distaste for the way they are managing things. Whereas among Republicans, President Bush has a 72%-22% (+50%) job approval/disapprove rating, Congress' is at 31%-59% (-12%). As was the case last summer and early fall until the President went on tour to press his case about Iraq, Republicans are sending clear warning to those on Capitol Hill who share their party affiliation but perhaps not their ideology.

To make matter worse, Republicans actually appear so near the point of despair that they are reportedly contemplating throwing in the towel and conceding the election to the Democrats. As we and others have noted a number of times, the major difference between this year's election and the one in '94, which shifted control of the Congress to the GOP, is the number of majority party incumbents willing to defend their seats. Incumbency is the strongest predictive variable in individual Congressional contests, and the only way that a huge swing in the alignment of the House might be accurately forecast is if there are a number of open seats abandoned by the majority party, which the minority party might steal. Up until last week, there was no indication that there would be a significant number of open GOP seats and therefore no reason to presume that there would be any large number of seats changing parties, despite what the Democrats and their media allies might want voters to believe.

But last week, cracks began to appear in the GOP majority as panic appeared to set in. Numerous sources reported that a number of Republicans are actually considering stepping aside, a development that would certainly put the battle for control of the House back in play. The *Wall Street Journal's* John Fund wrote the following, summarizing the developments:

GOP leaders have been holding a series of meetings this week on how to curb the number of retirements from office before November.

The problem is real. Political analysts told *The Hill* newspaper that 10 to 15 House Republicans may be on the verge of stepping down in coming weeks. Amy Walter, an editor at the *Cook Political Report*, is tracking the rate of retirements and comparing them with those of Democrats before the 1994 mid-term elections that swept House Democrats out of power. She reports that in August 1993, there were only three open Democratic seats. By the end

of March, the number had jumped to 22, and to 30 by the end of July. One out of eight Democratic seats ended up vacant in that fall's election. Republicans picked up the lion's share of those seats that were in competitive districts.

What Fund doesn't mention, indeed couldn't have mentioned, given that the news only broke yesterday, is that the exodus has already begun and has started with a very prominent member of the GOP conference. Yesterday morning, Bill Thomas, Bakersfield, CA chairman of the House Ways and Means, announced his retirement, perhaps opening up the proverbial flood gates. Republicans will argue, rightly, that Thomas's seat is "safe" and that his retirement in and of itself is not particularly troubling. But if his retirement is a portend of things to come, then there will, in fact, be trouble. The only way Republicans can make this fall's midterm particularly interesting is by panicking. And there are signs that this is precisely what they may be doing.

Certainly then, it would appear that the Republicans have gone just as mad as their Democratic counterparts, given their rush to get as far away from a free-trade, free-enterprise story as possible, a similar rush to get far away from a president who remains popular with their base, and the apparent onset of potentially self-fulfilling despair about the elections,. Add in the Democrats' continued collapse, the apparent blood-lust-induced idiocy of the mainstream press and various players within the political polling community, and it's not hard to see how one might come to the conclusion that the entire political system has, at once, gone mad.

But it's a peculiar and specific type of madness. We simply can't shake the feeling that this is not just political foolishness, but part and parcel of a greater phenomenon in Western civilization that we've noted many times over the years and which springs from a repudiation of reality, a basic misunderstanding both of the capacity of human institutions to alleviate the ailments of the human condition and the roles that individuals can and should play in that process.

Now, it may seem that we're shifting gears pretty radically here and going off on a strange tangent. But bear with us. We promise there's a point to this.

What would you answer if we asked what pop star Madonna and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have in common? Most people, naturally, would answer that both are great dancers. But some might guess the real truth, namely that both are crazy. And a might even recognize that their affliction is not your average, run-of-the-mill type of craziness, but is a very specific type.

Both the Material Girl and President of the Islamic Republic are nuts because they are, apparently, anxiously anticipating the end of time/final days. Moreover, both are self-involved enough to believe that they'll have something to do with the messiah/mahdi's triumphant arrival. Ahmadinejad is, of course, awaiting the re-emergence of the 12th Imam from the well Isfahan and believes that he can hasten his arrival by fomenting global chaos. But Madonna, for her part, seems to agree that the "anointed one" is on his way. And like Ahmadinejad, she appears to believe that her presence at the messiah's arrival will be of particular concern. According to the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Abaronot*, "U.S. pop diva Madonna wants to buy a house in the Israeli town of Rosh Pina, where the ancient Jewish Kabbalah tradition expects the Messiah to appear at the end of the world." Apparently, she wants a ringside seat for the end of days.

And while Madonna and Ahmadinejad may be "special" in that they're religious zealots, the spirit that moves them is not all that unique in this day and age. Indeed, it is the same spirit of unrealistic expectations and indulgent self absorption that appears to be the driving force behind much of the madness that we detailed above and even much that we didn't.

What, for example, makes European and American liberals believe that they can advance the causes of women's rights and gay rights by supporting radical multiculturalism and encouraging the enemies of the United States, enemies who, by the way, treat women

as chattel and impose the death penalty on anyone caught engaged in homosexual acts? Rational people see this as madness. But the leftists, imbued with a sense of their own extreme importance to the grand design and a hopeless misunderstanding of the forces with which they are dealing, nevertheless believe not only that they are on the right track, but that they are the only ones who can be.

What makes former NARAL head Kate Michelman believe that she can advance “women’s issues” or preserve the status quo of abortion on demand by entering Pennsylvania’s Senate race, thereby drawing votes from pro-life Democrat Bob Casey, Jr., who represents the Democrats’ best chance to knock off an incumbent Republican this November? Rational people see this as madness and understand full well that the consequences of her actions will likely be to bolster the chances that Sen. Rick Santorum will actually complete an improbable comeback and win re-election. But there’s no telling Michelman that. In her mind, the entire feminist movement is at stake and only she can save it.

Finally, what makes a blowhard pretty-boy like George Clooney get up and give a speech at the Oscars proudly proclaiming that he, like the rest of Hollywood, is out of touch with average Americans and that that is a good thing, since actors are morally superior and will therefore have an obligation to change average Americans’ attitudes as they always have, through the power of film? Rational people know that George needs to lay off the pipe and that he and most of his Hollywood contemporaries are blinkered ideologues who know almost nothing about American values or the defense of those values. But in George’s world, he’ll go on changing the world for the better by simply taking home a \$15 million paycheck for a couple months of “work” and blathering endlessly about how Bill O’Reilly is the anti-Christ.

This eschatological-inspired madness has always been a characteristic of the modern left, its existence documented for over half-a-century now by the likes of William F. Buckley and Eric Voegelin. The

difference today is that madness appears to have spread beyond its traditional habitat and become characteristic of all – or at least most – components of the political culture. And because it is so ubiquitous, it threatens the functionality of the political system and, in turn, impairs President Bush’s ability to perform at a moment in history when the President’s performance should not be impaired.

Critics will almost certainly argue that Bush suffers from a similar madness as well, in that he too has fallen into the trap of believing that the ideal is both achievable and desirable. And they would be right. To deny that there is more than a whiff of messianism in President Bush’s foreign policy agenda and pronouncements would be a fool’s errand. But Bush’s madness seems at least to be constrained. He appears to have a sense that his personal popularity and his personal “will to power” are not at issue. His idealism, naive though it may be, is not inwardly focused and centers instead on the power of the American spirit and the American military, and the universality of what have come to be known “Western values.” The idealism of much of the rest of political community, by contrast, is almost entirely self absorbed and devoid of governing principles. There is, in this idealism, a belief in the indispensability of the individual actors and a consequent need to do “whatever it takes” to achieve their ends or at least to maintain their political viability.

Two weeks ago, we chided a handful of Republicans and Republican-leaning media types for attacking the Bush presidency as naïve while they themselves suffered from similar naivety. And that was before the Dubai ports deal became an issue and sent Republicans in Congress screaming and running both from reason and from their purported principles.

One need not believe the administration’s tired line about anti-Arab racism to have a problem with the reaction of Republicans in Congress. For that matter, one need not even agree with the President’s position on the deal to see their reaction as crass, self absorbed, and feckless. Rather than stand up for what they purportedly believe (free trade, globalization of

commerce, etc.) or to argue why exceptions to those values might need to be necessary during the global war on terror, Republicans simply slammed the door on the deal because they believed it threatened their electoral prospects and because it would probably be too much work to convince the electorate that its initial, knee-jerk reaction might be wrong.

These folks appear believe that they are the indispensable cog in American politics and that it matters little what or on whom they trample to preserve their position.

The same forces of self-centeredness, fecklessness, and naïve idealism are, not coincidentally, at play throughout much of the rest of the political community as well, particularly in the media.

The dangers here are twofold. First, as we noted two weeks ago and as members of Congress appear occasionally to forget, there is a war on. And if the President is going to be able to carry out his responsibilities as commander-in-chief and fight this war effectively, then he will almost certainly need some support from someone somewhere in the political system. President Bush has the personal fortitude to soldier on irrespective of the level of support provided by other political elites. But his task would be far easier and far more successful if he did not have to fight alone.

Second, there is a real risk that all of this dabbling in unrealistic idealism will, over the long run, affect the American public's willingness to aggressively pursue its national interest. Seventy years of inflated and

unrealistic expectations with regard to domestic policy have certainly damaged the public's understanding of government's function and limitations. The threat is that a similar unrealism in matters of foreign policy, national security, and global competitiveness will have a similar effect, over time.

Before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began, many commentators on both sides of the aisle predicted that they would fail miserably because the American public would not tolerate casualties. But the fact of the matter is that the American public tolerates casualties just fine, if the cause is just. Indeed, it's the American elites who have a difficult time stomaching war dead. This circumstance is not likely to remain static, though, and if the madness among the political elites continues unabated, it is only a matter of time before the public's expectations grow equally warped.

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