

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

We will not so dishonor ourselves as even to say that we are the friends of knowledge and universal enlightenment; we know no advocates of ignorance; we have no sympathy with those, if such there be, who would withhold education from any portion of the human race; but we repeat that we regard half-education as worse than no education. We are not ashamed to avow our agreement with Pope, that

'A little learning is a dangerous thing
Drink deep, or taste not the Piernan spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
But drinking deeply sobers us again.'

The great mass of our American people can read and do read the newspapers, and many other things; and all of them fancy themselves competent to sit in judgment on all matters human and divine. They are equal to the profoundest philosophical speculations, the loftiest theological dogmas, and the abstrusest political problems. Filled with a sense of their own wisdom and capacity for sound judgment, they lose all teachableness, and are really in a more deplorable state than if they made no pretension to general intelligence

The surface of education has been greatly extended; and always in proportion as education extends laterally does it lose in depth. The diffusion of education among the laity has created an immense class of superficial thinkers, half-educated . . . more to be dreaded than those who have no education, as simplicity is always preferable to ignorance fancying itself wisdom.

Orestes Brownson, "The Present State of Society," 1843.

THE ORIGINS OF MADNESS.

Last week, we noted that we have written a great many articles over the past several years describing the madness that appears to have infected the American public square. For the most part, when attempting to explain this madness we have concentrated on the on-going cultural clash between left and right and on the left's anger and often-irrational reaction to losing the political clout that it has enjoyed for so many decades.

This week I would like to attempt to delve a little deeper into the origins of the turmoil within American society, in recognition of the fact, as we noted last week, that odd, foolish, and amusing political behavior is a derivative of something that is going on in American society that is much more troubling.

In this Issue

The Origins of Madness

Frequently Asked Questions

Subscriptions are available by contacting:

The Political Forum LLC 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Phone 540.477.9762 Fax 540.477.3359 melcher@thepoliticalforum.com www.thepoliticalforum.com

The first observation I would make in attempting this task is that America has become a world colossus of a kind that has never before been witnessed in history. It has wealth beyond dreams of avarice, to borrow a phrase from Dr. Johnson and a book title from Russell Kirk. Indeed, its wealth is so great and the influence of this wealth is so pervasive around the world that it is hard to imagine that any nation on earth could prosper in the absence of American prosperity, contrary to the apparent view of the “Oracle of Omaha.”

Just as importantly, the military power of the United States is almost beyond imagination. If it chose to do so, it could totally destroy any and all of its enemies in a veritable Armageddon of conflagration and terror. In fact, when thinking of the destructive capability of this nation, one wonders if perhaps Zeus was not correct to be angry with Prometheus for giving mankind the gift of fire.

If virtually any ancient power had controlled the military might that the United States has today, its enemies would be but a footnote in the history books. Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius could have recounted their wonderful epic stories of war and valor in a single line: “They nuked their foes and returned home.”

Surely had the leaders of the great Athenian democracy had the kind of overwhelming power that America has today to wreak destruction on its enemies, they would have totally destroyed the Persians and later the Spartans. After all, they once killed every male on the island Melos, sold the women and children into slavery, and repopulated the city with 500 Athenian colonists, not because Melos was an enemy of Athens, but simply because its citizens wished to remain neutral in the Peloponnesian War.

And there can be no doubt that if the Romans had possessed such military might, they would have wiped the human gene pool free of all traces of the European tribes, including the inhabitants of the island of Britannia, had any of these peoples

chosen to oppose the Roman Imperium. After all, when the Romans entered Carthage, they went door to door killing the inhabitants in what Richard Hooker described as “perhaps the greatest systematic execution of non-combatants before World War II.” Those who survived the slaughter were sold into slavery, the entire city was burned to the ground, the structural remains buried, the harbor was demolished, and the land was covered with salt so that not even plants would grow there again.

And lest one think that only the ancients were capable of employing genocidal brutality in the pursuit and maintenance of power, it is worth noting that three of modern history’s greatest murders, Hitler, Lenin, and Mao, would have had no qualms about destroying any and all persons, armies, or civilizations that dared to challenge their individual wills to power. Nor should anyone doubt that the Islamists would happily destroy the entire non-Muslim world to achieve their mad dreams of an Islamic utopia on earth.

Power is an extraordinary thing and power of the kind that the United States controls is unprecedented. When considering this, it is worth noting that one of the great lessons of history is that power, especially great power – and here we return to our theme – is a common cause of madness and irrationality in men and nations.

Both the history books and the great works of fiction in all languages and from all eras are replete with examples of this phenomenon. Indeed, Herodotus, the “Father of History,” opens his great work on the Persian Wars with an extensive account of the downfall of Croesus of Lydia, whose judgment was destroyed by the overweening pride and hubris that is so often a companion of great wealth and power.

The corruptive nature of power, about which Lord Acton spoke, comes in many forms. Sometimes, of course, power is sought and used for the express purpose of committing evil deeds. Often it manifests itself in various errant, messianic schemes to make the world a better place. That desire formed the basis of

Marx's mad dreams of building a "workers paradise" on earth, and was the origin of all the destructive and murderous "isms" of the 20th century, from communism, to socialism, to fascism, to Nazism.

History demonstrates that great power also is a cause of social and cultural decay. In fact, historians who study and write of the fall of civilizations never fail to note the destructive elements that seem always to accompany the advent of great wealth and power. The aforementioned Polybius, who witnessed the fall of Carthage along side his friend the great Roman General Scipio, who ordered and oversaw the destruction, described this phenomenon this way.

All things are subject to decay and change. When a state, after having passed with safety through many and great dangers, arrives at the highest degree of power, and possesses an entire and undisputed sovereignty, it is manifest that the long continuance of prosperity must give birth to costly and luxurious manners, and that the minds of men will be heated with ambitious contests, and become too eager and aspiring in the pursuit of dignities.

And as those evils are continually increased, the desire of power and rule, and the imagined ignominy of remaining in a subject state, will first begin to work the ruin of the republic; arrogance and luxury will afterwards advance it; and in the end the change will be completed by the people; when the avarice of some is found to injure and oppress them, and the ambition of others swells their vanity, and poisons them with flattering hopes.

For then, being inflamed with rage, and following only the dictates of their passions, they no longer will submit to any control, or be contented with an equal share of the administration, in conjunction with their rules; but will draw to themselves the entire sovereignty and supreme direction of all

affairs. When this is done, the government will assume indeed the fairest of all names, that of a free and popular state; but will in truth be the greatest of all evils, the government of the multitude.

In the United States, as we noted last week, one specific manifestation of great wealth and power has been an endless stream of grandiose government-directed plans to create a human society free from risk and from the consequences of the human condition. We also have seen that the practice of "moral politics" has taken the place of moral behavior. As my friend Claes Ryn once put it, a devotion to abstract "principles" and "rights" has bypassed the real problem of building character and has inspired "an arrogance of power." And, as we have also seen, when measures to reform American society fail to accomplish their purpose, reformers expand their horizons and promote grandiose schemes to introduce the wonders of American life to foreign societies and cultures.

In addition, we have seen vast, cultural stresses spring forth from the moral flabbiness that Claes describes. Russell Kirk listed the warning signs of a society that is in the throes of this madness in the introduction to his aforementioned, 1991 book of essays, *Beyond Dreams of Avarice*. They are:

- "The decay of popular faith in an enduring moral order, so that mutual trust dissolves.
- The diminishing of a readiness on the part of the individual to make sacrifices for the common good--so encouraging an individualism that slides toward anarchy.
- Obsession with creature-comforts and the accumulation of wealth--of money that serves no purpose for its possessor, as if he were the dragon Fafnir lying upon his hoard of gold: 'Let me slumber- I lie in possession!'

- A frantic pursuit of sexual pleasures, including those on the wilder shores of lust, which lead only to personal satiety and frustration, and to ghastly social diseases.
- A swift decay of manners--although, as James Russell Lowell wrote, 'It is manners that keep the bowie-knife from our throats.'
- A failure of political imagination, so that our cities have become great wens of abomination, most of them, and foreign affairs are conducted confusedly, and the greater domestic problems of the civil social order--among them, the growth of a proletariat--receive no consistent competent attention.
- A frantic eagerness for the violent sensations of the moment, regardless of consequences tomorrow--most notoriously, in reckless addiction to narcotics that burn out body and brain.
- A yearly increase in the perpetration of what used to be called capital crimes, and in the commission of frauds.
- A weakening of even the nuclear family, the fundamental human institution, bringing about the neglect or the abuse of children.
- The degradation of the democratic dogma, as shown in the character of many public men, the increasing of centralized power, and indifference of a great part of the population--so that in time we may have our American Caesars.
- And the mediocrity, or sometimes inanity, of our educational structure, from kindergarten to graduate school--about which many complain, but with respect to which little noticeable improvement occurs."

This final point brings me to another observation about the origin of the madness that appears to have infected the American public square. And that involves an educational system that is turning out deplorably half-educated Americans, as described by Brownson in the "They Said It" section above, who are unsuited to the challenges of leading a nation whose destiny will determine whether the 21st century will be a period of peace and prosperity or war and pestilence.

The result is a nation in the which the people and their leaders wallow in information and pride, but are sadly lacking the wisdom, courage, prudence and genuine patriotism that would be necessary to live up to the great task that their industrious ancestors have bequeathed to them. And that's enough to drive anyone mad.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS.

To hear the folks in the press tell it, everyone in Washington is at all times either questioning someone or being questioned by someone. Over the past few weeks, we've read and heard all about how the Democrats are questioning President Bush's leadership on the war in Iraq; about how the Republicans in Congress are questioning Bush's leadership on domestic issues, from immigration to spending to port security; about how Democratic Congressional hopefuls are questioning Howard Dean's value to the party, given that the Democratic National Committee is, under his direction, raising almost no money and being badly beaten, both in terms of message and money, by its GOP counterpart; about how Republicans are always and everywhere questioning Democrats' patriotism; etc., etc., etc.

For our part, we're more than willing to agree that there's a great deal in contemporary politics that warrants questioning. And we understand why so much attention is lavished on the entire dialogue.

After all, questioning the status quo is how innovative and effective policy prescriptions are developed. But we can't help wondering if the focus is misplaced. With everyone worried about who is questioning whom and about what, no one appears to be asking whether any of the questions being asked make sense.

Take, for example, the issue of Jay Bennish, the high school geography teacher in Colorado who has been placed on paid leave by the Cherry Creek school district until it can be determined if he violated district policy by ranting and raving in a lecture to his class of 10th graders about how awful President Bush and the United States are. By now, the content of his tirade is fairly well known and well worn. Bush is Hitler; the United States is "the most violent nation on earth"; capitalism is "at odds" with human rights, caring, compassion, and "humanity"; blah; blah; blah.

The debate that has erupted in Colorado and throughout the nation over this lecture has focused principally on rights. One side says that by passing this garbage off as education, Bennish has denied students their right to an education free from political prejudice and "balanced" in its ideological content, thus violating school district policy, justifying his suspension, and quite possibly earning him a dismissal. The other side insists that the infamous student recording has been taken out of context and that Bennish's suspension and prospective dismissal deny his right to free speech, to conduct his class as he sees fit, and to engage his students in a "Socratic dialogue" designed to spur discussion through controversy.

All of this is well and good. But it's also beside the point. This incident raises serious questions about the education system, about its impact on American competitiveness, and about its dedication to the nation's founding principles. Yet none of these issues will be addressed if the debate continues to focus on whether someone's rights have been violated. The fundamental question here isn't "who was wrong?" or "Does Bennish deserve a second chance to live up to the policies of his employer?" The question that matters is: "How did this guy get a job in the first place?"

Others might include these: How is it that somebody who is so manifestly ill informed is considered qualified to teach kids? Who are we putting in charge of our children's education? How are they trained? What is their proficiency in the subject matter they teach? If the system is flawed, who perpetuates it nonetheless? Unfortunately, the reason that no one wants to raise these questions is because we know the answers. And we've known them for a long time. And they are not encouraging.

Last month, in a piece entitled "The Origins of Democratic Party Lunacy," we noted that teacher education has, in many education schools, become little more than a process of ideological indoctrination. As American Enterprise Scholar Frederick Hess noted in a *Washington Post* article from which we quoted heavily, "teachers colleges have begun to regulate the dispositions and beliefs of those who would teach in our nation's classrooms."

Though Hess says ed school problems are "beginning," they actually date back many years. Six years ago, The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future released a report, "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future," that detailed many of the problems facing the education system and resulting from ed. schools' defective instruction of their charges and their focus on ideology and process over content. The Commission put it thusly:

Teacher recruitment and hiring are distressingly ad hoc, [leading to] the continual hiring of large numbers of people as "teachers" who are unprepared for their jobs. . . . In recent years, more than 50,000 people who lack the training required for their jobs have entered teaching on emergency or substandard licenses.

Nearly one-fourth (24%) of all secondary teachers do not have even a minor in their main teaching field. This is true for more than 30% of mathematics teachers. Fifty-six percent of high school students taking

physical science are taught by out-of-field teachers, as are 27% of those taking mathematics and 21% of those taking English.

Nine years ago, in a piece for *The Public Interest*, Rita Kramer foretold these findings and explained exactly how it is that education schools churn out so many strikingly unqualified teachers. In 2000, we quoted heavily from Kramer's piece ("Inside the Teachers' Culture") in an article entitled: "Public Education: The Blind Leading the Blind." We wrote:

Rita Kramer argued that the problem stems, at least in part, from the fact that the "less prestigious undergraduate colleges of education are generally recognized as a dumping ground for mediocre students. High-school graduates going into education consistently have the lowest SAT scores of any entering freshmen. They have neither the background nor the intellectual tools to question what they are taught, all too often a grab-bag of pieties about the influence of race, ethnicity, and gender on learning."

Most education students, Kramer asserts, "have scant interest in culture, history, literature, or science. They went into teaching, they insist, because they 'care.' In some vaguely defined way they want to 'help.'" They are, she says, "supposedly taught how to teach but have little knowledge of anything to teach." The result, according to Kramer, is that they leave school "better prepared to teach about socially transmitted diseases than the Copernican revolution or the Renaissance."

Kramer contends that one need look no further than the course lists offered to and mandated of students at teachers' colleges to understand why teachers are so unprepared to teach course material of any substance. "Education students take a series of mind-numbing courses with titles

like 'Instructional Strategies' in which they are introduced to various kinds of teaching techniques, some of which are based on current fads."

All the while, ed students learn very little of the subjects they will be teaching. "The level of literacy of the ed-school subset of the university faculty is indeed quite low. In a class on the teaching of reading, a professor apologizes for assigning too much reading – 20 pages of children's books over a weekend." They are, Kramer says, "as ignorant of the wonders of literature, and as little acquainted with the milestones of civilization, as their young pupils."

Given that all of this has been common knowledge for at least a decade, is there really anyone who is surprised by what's happened at Overland High School? Is anyone really shocked that Jay Bennish appears so blindingly ignorant of a few fundamental facts about government, history, economics, sociology, and the process of teaching? Does anyone believe that this guy, who purports to teach geography, could find his backside with both hands?

The real problem here is that this situation is likely to resolve itself in one of two ways: either Bennish will be returned to the classroom, chastened and more "balanced," but still mind numbingly ignorant; or he will be terminated and replaced by another teacher, who, odds are, will be equally unqualified. In either case, some people will be thrilled; others will be enraged; and nothing will change. The students at Overland High will still get shortchanged and another generation of high school sophomores will complete their geography studies without being able to locate the world on a globe, all because no one had the sense to ask the right questions.

Sadly, the people who have lined up on the respective sides in the Bennish debate are hardly the only ones asking the wrong questions these days. Most of the politicians and pundits who are the most excited about the Dubai Ports World debacle fall into this

category also. There have rightly been a number of questions raised about how this mess may affect relations with Dubai, with other Arab countries, and with other foreign investors who might reasonably fear that they too will be singled out as “unworthy” of investing their capital in the capital hungry American economy. But the answers to such questions are likely to be readily and promptly apparent. Indeed, if media reports are to be believed, already some Middle Eastern central banks are contemplating switching reserves from dollars to euros, in part out of pique, but in part out of concern for investments, given the tenor of the political debate in this country.

The answers that will not be readily apparent are the answers to those questions that are not being asked. For example: “how will the ports affair affect the risk assessments done by investors from nations that are not, like the Arabs and Chinese, considered to be ‘hostile?’” Will they too question the tenor of the political debate and begin to question their possible return on investment?

It is worth remembering here that the Dubai Ports deal involved a seller as well as a buyer, and this seller was the venerable British company Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation (P&O). If House Armed Service Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter had had his way, the P&O-DPW deal would never have been made. Moreover, he says now that he wants the scuttling of that deal to serve as a precedent and for Congress to have oversight of all sales of all “critical infrastructure” to foreign investors. What he is really asking is that the 535 members of Congress (and the political baggage they carry) be given veto authority over the sale of any company – any British, German, Japanese, Canadian, Australian, French, or Polish company – that has American “infrastructure” holdings.

We don’t have the foggiest notion what percentage of the DPW-P&O acquisition price was related to prospective returns from American port operations, but we imagine it was not insignificant. And we imagine as well that if DPW had known that it was going to have to divest its soon-to-be acquired American holdings, its offer to P&O almost

certainly would have been substantially lower than the \$6.8 billion that sealed the deal. Any company currently holding investments in American “critical infrastructure,” described by *The Wall Street Journal* to include “roads, telecommunications, airlines, broadcasting, shipping, technology firms, water facilities, buildings, real estate, and even U.S. Treasury securities,” has just seen Congress lower the intrinsic value of those assets immeasurably by limiting their potential purchasers. And any “friendly” company looking to get more involved in such infrastructure now has to fear that political forces and the whims of Congress will affect the future value of investments.

So what will be the criteria and process employed by Congress to take on this Herculean task? And more to the point, what will all of this do to global perceptions of America’s investment environment, even among those who don’t have to fear that Congress’s closed-mindedness and economic illiteracy will affect them directly? Not surprisingly, no one seems to be asking.

Of course, most members of Congress from both parties now believe that the ports issue is behind them and that they can therefore get back to worrying about the midterms elections. And this raises the specter of a whole new array of irrelevant questions being asked and answered and a whole new array of relevant ones being ignored.

Among the biggest questions on the collective mind of the political class are “what does the Democratic Party believe?” And “how might the American voters be made aware of what the party believes, once that has been determined?”

Throughout the Bush presidency, the Democratic Party has been plagued by insecurity and concern over its inability to take advantage of Republican miscues. Over the last several weeks, this exercise in self-doubt has reached new heights, with many Democrats and many supporters excoriating party leaders for failing to make any inroads with the voting public, despite the fact that historical trends and current events both would suggest that Democrats’ reemergence as the majority party should be all but guaranteed.

It seems that the problem, at least according to the party's leaders, is that it has been unable to answer either of the above questions. And this is a problem they aim to solve. Party big shots have spent weeks perfecting their campaign slogans and crafting their midterm message. Democrat-friendly columnists and pundits have been suggesting communications strategies and urging "boldness" and "aggressiveness" from party leaders in implementing those strategies. And all of this centers around the idea that Democrats' real problem is that they are both unsure of what they stand for in the post-Clinton era and unable to communicate those beliefs to the electorate.

But that's just nuts. The Democrats' problem isn't that they don't know what they believe or that voters don't know what they believe; it's that voters know all too well what Democrats believe, and they don't like it. The Democratic Party *sans* Clinton believes in the same things in which it has believed for thirty years or more now: higher taxes, more regulation, greater government interference in everyday life, collective solutions to individual problems, abortion on demand, and a focus on domestic issues rather than foreign policy matters. Add to these the emergence of such issues as gay marriage and the war on terror and the Democratic Party continues to embrace beliefs that conflict with the beliefs held by most Americans on most issues.

The reason that Democrats spend so much time fussing over the minutiae of their "message" is not because they are trying to figure out a way to package their beliefs more attractively, but precisely the opposite. They're trying to obscure their beliefs more attractively. One of the drawbacks of the Democratic political strategy, which, since the New Deal, has been to forge a governing coalition from a host of diverse pressure groups, is that the party has become beholden to the extremists in each pressure group. In practice, this means that the extremists' positions become the party's default positions on nearly every issue. The challenge for party leaders for years now has been how best to hide this extremism from voters. That they have been largely unsuccessful in doing so doesn't suggest that the party needs a

new, bolder communications strategy or new, bolder leadership. Rather, it suggests that the party needs a new governing strategy and a new set of core beliefs more in line with those held by the American people. So the relevant question, never asked and therefore never answered, is what role is there in America for a Democratic Party that believes in what this Democratic Party believes in?

On the Republican side, the question of the year appears to be "can the party hold Congress in the midterm elections?" That's a legitimate question, of course, since its answer will be immeasurably important to the performance of the government over the final two years of the Bush presidency. But it's not the most important question.

In our estimation, the most important question is "*should* the party retain power this November?" In a normal world and under normal circumstances, the answer would be a resounding "no." Republicans in Congress have shown themselves to be untrue to their own professed principles and unable to resist the temptations of power. But more to the point, they have shown themselves to be crass, feckless, opportunistic, and unworthy of political power at a critical moment in the nation's history. They are, for the most part, unreliable in their support of the President and unconcerned about the effect that their actions may have on the progress of the war. They are, in short, unfit to govern.

But, as we have mentioned countless times before, this is not exactly a normal world. The GOP's willingness to put politics above policy is great, but pales in comparison to the Democrats'. Just when it appears that Congressional Republicans have done themselves in, along comes someone like Wisconsin Senator and presumed presidential hopeful Russ Feingold, who yesterday introduced legislation to "censure" President Bush for using electronic surveillance to try to stop terrorists from carrying out attacks here at home. Feingold, bless his heart, serves as a reminder that for all their faults, Republicans are still more responsible wartime leaders than the Democrats, who would, were they to win in November, use their majority to

undermine the President and the war effort openly and aggressively for the entirety of the next two years.

While many Republicans will find comfort in the fact that they are still preferable to the Democrats as national leaders, they shouldn't. This happy circumstance stems not from their own strength, but from the Democrats' weakness. If Republicans believe that it is clear that they *should* remain in power – so clear, in fact, that the question of their worthiness doesn't even merit asking – and if they believe further that the only pertinent question is whether they actually will remain in power, then the temptation will be to do whatever it takes to do so. And things could very well turn even uglier if they yield to that temptation.

But that, of course, is the threat posed when the

wrong questions are asked. Only a fool would pretend that there are not a great many serious problems facing the country and a great many proposed solutions that merit questioning. But when the wrong questions are asked, the right answers are nearly impossible to discern. And that means simply that the problems will not only not be solved, but will likely be made worse.

Copyright 2006. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved.

Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.