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THEY SAID IT

Finally, as it will be accepted in principle that the state is responsible for establishing fraternity on behalf of its citizens, we shall see the entire people transformed into petitioners. Landed property, agriculture, industry, commerce, shipping, industrial companies, all will bestir themselves to claim favors from the state. The public treasury will be literally pillaged. Everyone will have good reasons to prove that legal fraternity should be interpreted in this sense: "Let me have the benefits, and let others pay the costs." Everyone's effort will be directed toward snatching a scrap of fraternal privilege from the legislature. The suffering classes, although having the greatest claim, will not always have the greatest success.

Frederic Bastiat, "Justice and Fraternity," 1848.

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A PLAGUE OF WILLFUL IGNORANCE.

Throughout most of human history, the really big problems that have beset mankind have been far beyond the ability of anyone living at the time to avoid or manage. Plagues, famines, natural disasters, and wars have taken a huge toll in human life and caused immense suffering throughout the centuries. But for most of recorded history, catastrophes such as these have been considered to be an ordinary part of human existence. In fact, more often than not, the citizens of a nation or society that has been hit by one or more these calamities have assumed that it was God's will, sent as a punishment for their sins. And while they took various steps to mitigate the damage, they recognized that they were largely powerless to do anything meaningful on their own behalf.

It wasn't until the early part of the 20th century that mankind made any truly significant advances in the fields of medicine, agriculture, engineering, and architecture that actually succeeded in helping nations and communities to prevent plagues, famines, and natural disasters from occurring and to mitigate the consequences of those that could not be stopped. Likewise, it wasn't until after the terrible destruction of World War I that the major nations of the world began to think about establishing globally inclusive mechanisms by which they might cooperate with each other to avoid wars between and among themselves. This particular enterprise has been markedly less successful than the similar efforts aimed at plagues, famines, and natural disasters, but it did represent a step in the direction of recognizing the possibility of avoiding some wars through the use of global diplomacy, coalition building, and mutual defense pacts.

Astute observers of mankind will recognize that a new problem has become increasingly prominent as a source of human suffering and hardship around the world, which is likely to prove equally impossible to prevent and to require equal human ingenuity to limit its destructive nature. Those who have studied this phenomenon refer to it as “willful ignorance syndrome” and define it as the willful and deliberate refusal by political leaders to support and implement social and economic policies that they absolutely know – or have no excuse for not knowing – would greatly improve the overall affluence of their country and the well being of the vast majority of its citizens.

Victims of this disease are not to be confused with ordinary tyrants, who place their own interests above all other considerations, or with plain old ignorant rulers and politicians who do stupid things to the detriment of their country and its citizens. The world has always had its share of these particular types and always will. But, as a general rule, the quest for power and wealth has been a primary motivation of rulers and politicians of all strains and persuasions since the beginning of recorded time. Some, maybe many, have made no attempt to use this power justly or to distribute this wealth fairly. But with the exception of a few relatively small communities committed by their religion to a stoic existence, it is rare to encounter an example in the history books of a nation or region whose leaders have taken deliberate steps, based solely on willful ignorance, to keep that entity and its citizens poorer and more miserable than they needed to be.

Until the 20th century that is. Today, this kind of behavior is so common all over the world that it can justly be described as a plague of biblical proportions, a disease of the brain brought on, in almost all cases, by a prolonged exposure to socialism, which epidemiologists, who have studied this disease, point out renders masses of individuals and their rulers incapable of recognizing social and economic truths that are both demonstrable and totally obvious to healthy individuals of even modest intelligence.

This terrible disease has done enormous harm to millions of people around the world. It has reached epidemic proportion in France, Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and other parts of Europe, all over Africa and South America, and has spread into certain regions and locales of the United States, most especially on the two coasts and in and around cities and towns that contain colleges and universities. Humanities professors and Hollywood celebrities appear to be particularly susceptible to terribly debilitating forms of this illness.

France is the quintessential prototype of a nation suffering a full-blown epidemic of “willful ignorance syndrome.” Specialists in this disease note that an overwhelming majority of the citizens and the politicians of this benighted country have been rendered by this syndrome incapable of grasping even the most basic aspects of human nature or even the simplest economic and social truths that mankind has uncovered during the 230 years since Adam Smith spelled out the rudiments of modern economics. And it was in France recently that epidemiologists discovered that one of the most troubling aspects of this illness is that it actually increases in intensity as evidence mounts that the beliefs of its victims are pure nonsense.

In analyzing time-lines, they learned that there was a period early on in France’s flirtation with socialism when some French citizens were well aware of the potential dangers of this goofy economic system and spoke out against it. One such was Frederic Bastiat, the 19th century French intellectual, politician, and economist who spoke truth to the madness of such early French socialists as Gracchus Babeuf, Philippe Buonarrotti, Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Pierre Proudhon, Louis Blanc, Etienne Cabet, Armand Barbes, and Martin Bernard.

Today, Bastiat’s thoughts stand as a prime example of the kind of simple truths that the French victims of “willful ignorance syndrome” are physiologically incapable of understanding. An excerpt from an essay written by Bastiat over 150 years ago appears in the “They Said It” section above, and another one follows here:

[The socialists declare] that the state owes subsistence, well-being, and education to all its citizens; that it should be generous, charitable, involved in everything, devoted to everybody; that its mission is to feed the infants, instruct the young, assure employment to the able-bodied, provide pensions for the disabled; in a word, that it should intervene directly to relieve all suffering, satisfy and anticipate all wants, furnish capital to all enterprises, enlightenment to all minds, balm for all wounds, asylums for all the unfortunate, and even aid to the point of shedding French blood, for all oppressed people on the face of the earth.

Who would not like to see all these benefits flow forth upon the world from the law as from an inexhaustible source? . . . But is it possible? . . . Whence does [the state] draw those resources that it is urged to dispense by way of benefits to individuals? Is it not from the individuals themselves? How, then, can these resources be increased by passing through the hands of a parasitical and voracious intermediary? Is it not clear, on the contrary, that the whole apparatus of government is of such a nature as to absorb many useful resources and to reduce the share of the workers proportionately? Is it not also evident that the latter will thereby lose a part of their freedom, along with a part of their well-being?

Today, an idea such as this is incomprehensible to the great majority of French politicians and citizens alike. Indeed, the kind of ideas that French victims of “willful ignorance syndrome” substitute for such truths are so bizarre that they would astound even the early socialists themselves, who generally subscribed to the proposition that the success of socialism depended on a working class that recognized the obligation to actually do some work. For example, the official response by the brain-damaged political leaders of today’s France to rising unemployment is that everyone should work fewer hours and take longer vacations.

Recently, a tiny ray of truth fought its way through the fog of willful ignorance in France when a political leader suggested that rules that severely restrict the rights of employers to fire young workers may have something to do with the 20% unemployment rate among such workers. So he proposed a simple, common sense plan to address this issue. The entire nation either rose up in protest or shrank from the controversy. And the plan was withdrawn.

So far at least, there is no known vaccine or cure for this growing, global plague. Truth and logic are of little or no use in combating it. Nor have its victims gained any relief from the highly publicized results of empirical experiments in which two great nations, Russia and China, attempted over an extended period of time to live under socialist rule and not only failed to gain power and prosperity but vastly increased the incidences of premature deaths, human misery, poverty, cultural decay, economic failure, and environmental destruction.

Indeed, when the world learned the full extent of the catastrophic social, economic, and human devastation that socialism wrought on these two nations, victims of “willful ignorance syndrome” in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Africa responded by blithely claiming that “they did it wrong” and simply placed these failures among all of the other obvious truths that “willful ignorance syndrome” had rendered them incapable of understanding.

Oddly enough, Russia and China, which are still home to the world’s largest populations of victims of “willful ignorance syndrome” may provide an insight into the means by which this terrible plague eventually plays itself out within a given society. This process is a long way from completion in both of these nations, so we can’t predict the course of events with any certainty. But in the near term, it appears that the devastating impact that this disease has on the economy and culture of a nation over a long period of time eventually leaves the door wide open for a takeover by a band of ruthless, but clear-minded totalitarian leaders. These men slip the chains of dogma and adopt the role of enlightened saviors,

promising an astoundingly ignorant citizenry that they will preserve the great and grand benefits of socialism under slightly different rules of procedure.

It's an ugly prognosis, I know. But fortunately, there is another prototype that may help in the eventual discovery of a means for preventing the spread of this plague and to assist nations that are beset with it to recover. This prototype can be found in Eastern Europe, or as Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld would call it, "New Europe." There, where conditions were once ripe for an full blown epidemic of "willful ignorance syndrome," healthy citizens fought back, actually considered the consequences of socialism, studied alternative economic choices, and chose correctly. One can only hope that by studying this success, epidemiologists can someday find the ways and means to keep this dreadful plague from spreading and to help individuals and nations that are suffering from it to eventually recover both their sanity and their freedom.

RUMSFELD AND THE GENERALS.

The latest assault against the Bush administration by its domestic critics was, sadly enough, utterly predictable. Neither the specific target nor the source of the attacks comes as a surprise. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has been a lightning rod for criticism from day-one of this administration, and he has been fighting with many of the same generals who are now publicly raking him over the coals since even before then.

Moreover, the broader debate concerning the appropriate relationship between the military and its civilian masters is as old as the Republic itself. The only thing that makes this particular flare-up in these long-standing clashes even remotely interesting is the context in which it takes place, namely that it comes at a time when the nation is engaged in a war that most of its media and political elites detest. Given this context, there is the distinct possibility that the

net result of this discord will be precisely the opposite of that for which its instigators almost certainly had hoped.

In defense of this contention, we'll begin with a little background, most of which will shock no one. Secretary Rumsfeld is, most observers agree, an anomaly in 21st century Washington. Like his bosses (President Bush and Vice President Cheney), Rumsfeld knows what he believes. But unlike almost anyone else in town, he's unafraid to give unvarnished voice to those beliefs. He does not sugarcoat his thoughts in pleasant-sounding politically correct euphemisms or try particularly hard to be diplomatic. And while his candor is often appreciated and always compelling, it has also won him a great many enemies, who oppose not only the ideas he expresses but the manner in which he does so.

This has made him a target, as has the fact that he is one of the driving forces behind two successful yet complicated and largely unpopular military campaigns. Fifteen months ago, in our 2005 domestic politics forecast piece, we predicted that Rumsfeld would be "the preferred whipping boy of the anti-war factions on both the political left and right" in the second term and that opposition to him could be "expected to swell considerably over the next several months . . . as the work in Iraq proves more and more difficult." Because the Secretary of Defense makes a "perfect scapegoat," we wrote that he was "like God," in that "if he didn't exist, he would have to be created."

Of course, as you know, the current spate of complaints against Rumsfeld originated among the ranks of retired generals, six of whom have taken to the airwaves (or printing presses) over the last few weeks to call for the Secretary's head. This too is unsurprising. A large number of the nation's top military officers have never much cared for Rumsfeld, dating back some three decades.

In his first stint as Defense Secretary, near the end of the Ford administration, Rumsfeld clashed with generals who correctly believed that they could essentially ignore him, knowing that the odds were

excellent that he'd be gone long before they were. In the 1990s, Rumsfeld again irritated the top brass, serving as the head of the "Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States," which questioned the conventional military and intelligence wisdom on ballistic missiles, suggested that the threat of missile attacks from "rogue" nations was far more imminent than was generally believed, and advocated far greater commitment to a missile defense system and other technology-related military spending.

When Rumsfeld returned to the Pentagon in 2001, this already strained relationship collapsed completely. His ideas about military transformation brought him into direct conflict with many of the top generals, some of whom were appointed to their positions based, in part, on political considerations and all of whom had grown accustomed to the autonomy they'd enjoyed during the Clinton administration. The relationship between Rumsfeld and the military brass became very ugly very quickly, so ugly, in fact, that in the summer of 2001, it was presumed by most political observers that Rumsfeld would be the first Bush cabinet member to leave (or be removed), perhaps before he had even served a year.

In an August 2003 article, columnist and former deputy undersecretary for defense (under President Bush's father) Jed Babbin wrote the following about Rumsfeld's early, pre-9/11 clashes with two of his most prominent critics, one of whom (Maj. Gen. John Riggs) has participated in the Rumsfeld bashing of the last couple of weeks. To wit:

As soon as Mr. Rumsfeld took office, his plan to transform America's military ran into various levels of resistance in each of the services. The Navy was shaken by the thought that the aircraft carrier would have to evolve from its current form. The Air Force didn't want to hear that its new fighter — the F-22 — wasn't needed as much as it had been in the Cold War. But nowhere in Fort Fumble did he encounter utter refusal to change except in the Army . . .

[S]hortly after his accession Mr. Rumsfeld walked into the Tank — the vault-like conference room on the fourth floor of the Pentagon in which top-secret matters can be discussed freely — for a meeting with the Clintons' Army chief of staff, General Eric Shinseki . . . In that meeting, Shinseki tried to give Big Dog the Don Corleone treatment. Let me run things my way, said Shinseki, and I'll make you look really good on the Hill. But forget about transformation. The Army doesn't need it, and we don't plan to do it. Rumsfeld, to the surprise of his interlocutors, declined the offer they thought he couldn't refuse . . .

Instead of following Rumsfeld's orders, Shinseki slow-rolled transformation . . .

Lt. Gen. Johnny Riggs was Shinseki's director of the Army Objective Task Force, supposedly the office in charge of transforming the Army according to Rumsfeld's plan, but actually the office in charge of obstructing it. When Rumsfeld asked for an Army timetable for transformation, Shinseki and Riggs came up with a plan that would have taken 30 years to perform. By the year 2032, that plan — based on buying all sorts of things including Stryker — would have provided the "future force." When Rumsfeld rejected that, Riggs and Shinseki backed off by twenty years, but still effectively precluded transformation.

Despite the fact that Riggs and a number of the other now-exalted retired generals have been fighting with Donald Rumsfeld since long before 9/11 and over turf rather than strategy, the battle is, naturally, being framed in the worst possible light for the administration. As a result, the difficulties in Iraq have become the exclusive indictment against the Defense Secretary. On the surface this indictment would appear to be pretty damning, given that a majority of Americans believes that Iraq is a mess and would therefore like to have a scapegoat to blame. But

in truth, the charges against Rumsfeld won't stick, and neither the generals nor the media who have amplified their indignation are likely to be rewarded with the prize they seek. For a variety of reasons, it is exceptionally unlikely that the Secretary of Defense is going anywhere.

The idea that President Bush can be bullied into anything, much less into throwing one of his fiercest and most loyal aides under the proverbial train is flat out preposterous. If anything, the attacks on Rumsfeld will only serve to steel the President's dedication to his beleaguered Secretary. Here's how we put it in the aforementioned '05 forecast piece:

There are, of course, a handful of reasons why Rumsfeld will survive. For starters, George W. Bush is one of the most stubborn and independent men ever to occupy the White House. The very fact that official Washington wants Rumsfeld gone is, one would guess, more than enough reason for the President to keep him. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to guess that the chorus of Rumsfeld bashing will actually extend Rumsfeld's tenure beyond where it might otherwise have ended.

A second and perhaps more compelling reason to expect Rumsfeld's critics to fail is the fact that no matter how their media patrons may portray them, the generals are hardly perfectly authoritative on the subjects of Iraq, the "errors" made there, or Secretary Rumsfeld's culpability in any such mistakes. Yesterday, for example, another retired general, Marine Lieutenant General Michael DeLong took to the pages of *The New York Times* to answer the charges leveled by his former colleagues and to defend his former boss. DeLong described himself as the "No. 2 general at United States Central Command from the Sept. 11 attacks through the Iraq war," and "the daily 'answer man' to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld." He based his case on the premise that "the secretary always deferred to the general on war-fighting issues." And this case is at least as compelling, and likely more compelling, than anything any of the other generals have said.

Rumsfeld's critics slam him (and the President) for making costly decisions, yet if DeLong can be believed, those decisions were made with input from and deference to the most effective and persuasive military leaders. Sure, Rumsfeld had to choose from among conflicting opinions, but that's the nature of his job. And while it's easy to argue in retrospect that he chose wrongly, it is far harder to prove that. Rumsfeld's detractors never acknowledge the fact that we noted two weeks ago and that Hoover Institution fellow Victor Davis Hanson reiterated last week, namely that alternative decisions would also have had costs, or as Hanson put it: "for every argument offered by 'experts' [i.e. the generals], there was just as available a convincing counter-argument."

The media and the Democrats may still believe that George Bush is an idiot, but certainly he understands something that Rumsfeld's critics either don't get or are unwilling to acknowledge, namely that any decision made by the Defense Secretary or any of the other civilian leaders, regardless of what it was, would have been criticized by someone influential in the military.

Indeed, even if Rumsfeld had done everything differently, many of the very same critics would still be making many of the very same arguments today, complaining about the fact that, as Hanson put it, "in this war nothing is easy." If Bush were to cave under such pressure, which stems from personality conflicts coupled with specious and unprovable arguments, he would unnecessarily concede defeat, would encourage his adversaries to try again, and would set himself up to spend the remainder of his presidency fighting with critics who want this, that, or the other cabinet member fired for almost any offense, real or perceived.

A related reason to expect that the generals will not succeed in pressuring the President to sack his Defense Secretary is that it would almost certainly alter the balance of power between the military and its civilian masters, sapping power from the President or, more accurately, from the *presidency*, and at a most inopportune time.

Boston University professor Andrew Bacevich, who has been one of the Iraq war's most prominent right-leaning critics, nevertheless argued last week that the battle over Rumsfeld is really a battle over power in the Pentagon, with "Rumsfeld's pursuers . . . flirting with ideas that can only be regarded as subversive." Bacevich notes that some of the generals attacking Secretary Rumsfeld, most notably Gregory Newbold, have "resurrected the notion that a senior officer's primary obligation lies not to those atop the chain of command but to the Constitution."

While it's not hard to imagine a counter-argument positing that Bacevich has overstated the severity of the problem and the military desire to wrest complete control over its affairs from civilian leaders, certainly this is not a debate President Bush wants to have, particularly right now, with the outcome of both the Iraq war and the broader war on terror hanging in the balance and military action against Iran at least being contemplated. Giving in to the carping generals and removing Rumsfeld from office would almost certainly weaken the President's position with respect to the military, and that's something he simply can't afford to do.

Given all of this, the question we are left with is this: "If the generals are unlikely to be able to persuade President Bush to axe Donald Rumsfeld, what, then, is the likely outcome of this concerted attack on the Secretary of Defense?"

Sadly, it appears to us at least that one possible outcome is precisely the opposite of that which the generals themselves would almost certainly insist was their aim. If one were to ask the generals point blank why they are attacking the Defense Secretary so adamantly and so publicly, all six would likely say that they are motivated by a desire to protect and enhance the effectiveness and the public perception of the armed forces as a whole; that they see Rumsfeld's "micromanagement" as a threat to the services' effectiveness and that that threat, in turn, imperils the military's reputation. In lashing out at Rumsfeld, they are simply trying to counter those threats. But even

if we were to take them at their word on this – and we have no reason not to – they are highly unlikely to succeed in this effort and are, in fact, more likely to damage the military's reputation than to enhance it.

According to a Harris Poll published last month, the military ranks as the most respected institution in American public life, with nearly half (47%) of respondents expressing a "great deal" of confidence in the nation's warriors. Given the valiant efforts of our soldiers under rather difficult conditions and the generally positive media portrayals of individual servicemen, this finding is not terribly surprising. But it should hardly be taken for granted.

The first such Harris Poll, taken in 1966, showed that 61% of Americans had great confidence in the military. But after five years of constant and often unfair criticism, much of which came at the hands of former members of the armed services – including the Democrats' 2004 presidential nominee – respect for the military had collapsed. By 1971, only 27% percent of Americans claimed to have confidence in the armed forces. The military's numbers remained in the 20s and 30s for most of the following two decades, not rebounding entirely until roughly the first Iraq war.

While the six generals who have been attacking Secretary Rumsfeld may not know it, the fact of the matter is that they run a serious risk of similarly damaging the public's perception of the military and thus sending respect for the armed forces plummeting once again. The problem in this case is that the criticism being leveled at Rumsfeld smacks of opportunism. Regardless of the generals' earnest motives, the impression that they are leaving is that they are airing their dirty laundry in public in order to enhance their own status at the expense of Secretary Rumsfeld's.

It should not be forgotten when considering this that the spark that set off the current round of Rumsfeld-bashing was, in fact, Anthony Zinni's *book promotion tour*. Zinni's recently published *The Battle for Peace* is an "insider's view" of the war and is the principal reason

that he is suddenly a popular media attraction. As the old saw puts it, controversy sells. And attacking the sitting wartime Defense Secretary certainly creates controversy.

At least two of the other complainants have argued their cases in prominent national publications, a number have been the subjects of lavish media attention, and most, if not all of the generals in question are known to have had personal conflicts with Rumsfeld. Two (Zinni and Riggs) were unceremoniously dumped by Rumsfeld and Bush. Add to all of this what military historian Victor Davis Hanson has called “the ethical questions involved in promoting a book or showcasing a media appearance during a time of war by offering an ‘inside’ view unknown to others of the supposedly culpable administration of the military,” and you have a pretty good case that a number of these generals are doing considerably more harm than good with regard to the public’s perception of the military and its leaders. One of the military’s most respected and most valued attributes has always been its honor. And, for a variety of reasons, by going public with their complaints, these generals threaten at least the public perception of that honor.

Last week, former Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Thomas McInerney said that he was “embarrassed” by his fellow former generals’ comments about Donald Rumsfeld and the war in Iraq and by Anthony Zinni’s comments in particular. We strongly suspect that McInerney is not alone. Though there will likely be others who will join the six in publicly criticizing the Defense Secretary, a great many more – and, in our estimation, an overwhelming majority of the public – will wonder why Rumsfeld’s critics would break long-standing precedent and allow their professionalism to be questioned, all to make what is largely a political point.

It is fairly clear that Rumsfeld’s critics are not going to achieve their ultimate end. And given this, we have to wonder if the generals who have made headlines over the past couple of weeks by claiming that the Secretary of Defense made several significant strategic blunders did their own due diligence with regard to strategic planning. It seems to us that the rewards of their offensive will be slim, except in Zinni’s case, where book sales will soar. But the potential risks are great. One would think that under such conditions, the generals might heed their own advice and pull back.

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