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THEY SAID IT

The stakes [in Iraq] could not be higher. This is all the more reason to celebrate, to build on, and to consolidate what has already been accomplished. Instead of railing against the Bush administration, America's elites would do better, and incidentally display greater self-respect, to direct their wrath where it properly belongs: at those violent and unrestrained enemies of democracy in Iraq who are, in truth, the enemies of democracy in America as well, and of everything America has ever stood for.

Is Iraq a quagmire, a disaster, a failure? Certainly not; none of the above. Of all the adjectives used by skeptics and critics to describe today's Iraq, the only one that has a right of truth is "messy." Yes, the situation in Iraq today is messy. Births always are. Since when is that a reason to declare a baby unworthy of life?

Amir Taheri, "The Real Iraq," *Commentary*, June 2006.

WE'RE WINNING, REDUX.

Several readers questioned that part of last week's article entitled "We're Winning" that dealt with the war in Iraq. One individual specifically questioned whether the failure of the United States to create a decent, civil society in Iraq, which includes a functioning police force, is not in itself an indictment of the administration's conduct of the war, past and present.

Now it is important when considering this question to understand that it came from a person who has no anti-administration axe to grind, who is very knowledgeable about the Middle East, who wants the United States to be victorious, and who is, like all of us, trying hard to get a handle on how this thing is going to turn out because he is genuinely concerned about America's long-term defense capability and because this war is going to have an impact on the world financial markets for years to come. It is also important to understand that his quickly written, short question did not reflect the full extent of his concerns, but was representative of a much larger inventory of worries about President Bush's approach to militant Islam.

So this week we thought we would try to give a short, concise explanation of our views on this war and on the larger "war on terror," knowing that this will be highly subjective and that not everyone will agree with us, but hoping that the exercise will be useful as a focal point for thought and discussion.

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We'll begin with our bottom line, which we first stated in an article dated April 7, 2003 entitled "Our Despot Instead of Theirs" and that has not changed even slightly during the intervening three-plus years. It goes as follows:

My optimism is based fundamentally on the belief that any Iraq without Saddam is better than any Iraq with him, just as any Afghanistan without the Taliban and Osama bin Laden is a better Afghanistan. Period. Even if both nations were to continue to be lawless, uncivilized badlands run by desperate killers intent on launching attacks against their neighbors, as well as on the United States, this would still be a better situation than the one that preceded it, since the new killers would be pursuing their goals with significantly fewer resources than were available to the previous killers who were pursuing the same goals.

Needless to say, not everyone agrees with this assessment. Among other things, critics of President Bush maintain that he should have left Saddam alone and concentrated on Afghanistan; that U.N. sanctions and the oil for food program would eventually have brought Saddam down or rendered him too weak to be a threat; that he was no threat anyway and that he was not destined to become one since he had no weapons of mass destruction and no plans to make any; and that the money and energy spent on the regime change in Iraq could have been better spent on another front in the war on terror.

We disagree. Of course, it is easy, in retrospect, to come up with alternative actions that would have been cheaper and more effective. But as Whittier noted a century and a half ago, "of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been.'" And indeed, we believe that what "might have been" could have been a great deal sadder than it is today if President Bush had not moved quickly and decisively after the September 11 attacks to put militant Islam on the defensive worldwide, both within the United States and in their home territory.

More specifically, we simply do not believe that militant Islam would be weaker today and that the United States would be safer if Saddam Hussein were still in charge of Iraq, flush with oil money, cozy with China, Russia and Europe, and competing with Iran to see which nation would have the second "Islamic bomb." Sanctions were not working; the oil for food program was a dangerous joke; Saddam was playing games with the WMD issue; he was also providing aid and comfort to Islamic terrorist organizations; and would still be doing so today.

In fact, if Monday morning scenario spinning is the method of choice in assessing President Bush's actions, it is easy to come up with a scenario that makes the present problem of dealing with Iran's nuclear threat look like child's play when compared to what "might have been" if Saddam and his Ba'athist thugs were trumpeting Iraq's nuclear plans in concert with Ahmadinejad and his band of Islamofascists.

Certainly, there is ample ground for criticism of the Bush war planners. Among other things, they failed to anticipate the nature of the problems that the U.S. military would face in the aftermath of the defeat of the Iraqi army, apparently believing that the Iraqi people would be happy to have Saddam gone and would welcome the Americans as liberators. This was a grievous mistake and grievously has the American military paid for it. But it shouldn't have come as a surprise that mistakes would be made in an undertaking of this magnitude. There is no such thing as a mistake-free war.

Our biggest criticism of the Bush administration has been that the President has failed miserably to perform the single most important job of a president during wartime, which is to maintain public support for the effort. Early on, he made the requisite noise about sacrifice, "long war," etc. But then he seemed to have lost interest in the task. Apparently neither he nor anyone else on the Bush team absorbed one of the key lessons from Vietnam, namely that public opinion is a crucial battlefield in modern warfare.

We began emphasizing this point two and half years ago in an article entitled “How Bush Could Lose The War In Iraq.” We said at that time that the “task of convincing Americans that the venture in Iraq is worth the cost has, over the past few months, become one of the most important fronts in the war” and we argued that President Bush was in danger of losing this battle because he wasn’t making the case that victory in Iraq was absolutely crucial to the long term security of the United States.

We argued that he should immediately stop suggesting that the military effort in Iraq is aimed at making life better for the Iraqi people and instead spend his time convincing the American people that “the battle over Iraq is directly — very directly — linked to American security.” To this day, he has never adequately done this, as is evidenced by the waning public support for the war.

But setting criticism aside, it is now time to address the central issue, which is how the war itself is going. We’ll divide this discussion into three parts: the battle against the insurgency, efforts to establish a democratic government in Iraq, and the importance of the war in Iraq to overall battle against Islamic terrorism.

As for the fight against the insurgency, we would argue that this is going well, given the difficulty of the task. We would suggest that those who disagree have unrealistic expectations. It is extremely difficult to reduce the incidents of terrorism conducted by a determined, well-entrenched, indigenous group, even under the best of circumstances. It is virtually impossible to stop such incidents entirely. This has been amply demonstrated in numerous countries around the world, including Israel and Northern Ireland.

Closer to home, both of us vividly remember how difficult it was for the police to capture one deranged individual and his equally deranged child companion who were randomly shooting people with a .223 rifle from the trunk of an old car in the Washington, D.C. area four years ago. The insurgents in Iraq are better financed, better organized, better trained, and

more highly motivated than the “D.C. snipers,” were. And there are a lot more of them. And while these insurgents may well continue their efforts for years to come, they are no where near powerful nor scary enough to force the United States to turn tail and run, nor to force the current government in Iraq to throw up their collective hands like Roberto Duran and declare “No más.” It isn’t going to happen. And that’s a strong indication that the good guys will eventually win the battle for the streets of Iraq, because if the bad guys had more to throw at the government they would be doing it.

There is no denying that Iraq will be a bloody battleground for years to come. It is an enormously important strategic asset to each and every one of the civilizations that are currently clashing with each other around the globe. And it is “in play,” as the saying goes. The important question from the perspective of the United States is, quite simply, whether the current situation there, and what is likely to be the situation in the future, is better than “what might have been” had the United States left Saddam alone. And the answer, as far as we are concerned is a resounding yes.

As regards the democracy movement in Iraq, we believe that Americans should be proud of what the Bush administration and the nation’s military leaders have achieved to date. In the early days, when the administration first began to talk of introducing democracy in Iraq, we were absolutely convinced that this was a fool’s mission, and a dangerous one at that. And we were not shy about expressing this opinion in print. The first time was in the above-mentioned April 7, 2003 article entitled “Our Despot Instead Of Theirs,” in which we said;

I am optimistic that he [President Bush] will be able to install a leader in Iraq who is significantly less murderous than Saddam; and more importantly, one who “despots” (to coin a verb) for us rather than against us. I am also reasonably optimistic that President Bush knows better than to try to accomplish much more than that, at least in the near term. Or to put this another way, I am optimistic that he will not go overboard

with the idea of building a “democratic” Iraq. If he does, I will quickly become pessimistic. In my opinion, he may as well try to raise caribou over there.

While it took a long time for us to alter this unforgiving view, we eventually did and are now happy to admit that the Bush administration was right and we were wrong. The world may never witness a full-blown, Western style democracy in Iraq, but we now believe that the effort to introduce democracy into that benighted nation has been a positive development for Iraq, for the United States, for the Middle East, and for the world.

Yes, the Iraqi police force is corrupt and dysfunctional, the Iraqi military falls far short of what it needs to be, and the elected government is a hotbed of corruption and strife. This is, after all, a nation that is rife with tribal hatreds, religious intolerance, and corruption; that has millions of young, uneducated men with little prospect for meaningful employment; and that is home to a large, indigenous, well-armed insurgency movement. More importantly, it is an Islamic nation, which means that it is culturally antagonistic toward the very concept of democracy and free markets, with their emphasis on freedom of choice, a secular legal system, and separation of church and state. So it's no wonder that reform is not happening overnight and that it may fail. Our feeling toward all of this is best stated in the old bromide about the dancing pig, namely that the amazing thing is not how well the pig dances, but that the pig can dance at all.

This “democracy” may yet fail, and a murderous, anti-American despot may emerge as the nation's leader. It is also possible that the Iraqis will elect a murderous, anti-American despot. But it is also possible that a friendly, orderly regime will emerge from the chaos, and that was not even a possibility a few short years ago. Moreover, if a new despot were to assume the reigns of government in Iraq, he would, we think, have a much more difficult time securing the yoke of servitude around the necks of the Iraqi people as a result of their brief taste of freedom and participation in government. Indeed, it is likely, we think, that the

Iraqi experiment with democracy is likely to make life more difficult for dictators both near and far beyond the borders of Iraq.

And this brings us to the final topic, which is, as stated above, the importance of the war in Iraq to the overall battle against Islamic terrorism. Our view on this subject has not changed over the years. We thought when the war in Iraq was launched, and continue to think today, that President Bush was correct to take the fight into enemy territory.

While no one wants to put it this way, the fact is that the future prosperity and security of the United States depends on an ample supply of relatively inexpensive oil and a world that is peaceful enough to facilitate the flow of vast amounts of global commerce. A peaceful Middle East is essential to these conditions. Militant Islam is a threat to both. Eliminating Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq furthered the cause of weakening militant Islam. A democratic Iraq would further weaken it. A democratic Iraq that is friendly enough toward the United States to share responsibilities for preventing its unfriendly neighbors from becoming launching pads for attacks on Iraq, the United States, or other nations of the world would be even more beneficial to the cause of assuring America's future prosperity and security.

We'll never know “what might have been,” if President Bush had not gone to war in Iraq. But we do know that things could be a lot worse. We could be writing a story entitled “We're Losing, Redux.” But we're not doing that. And we don't expect to.

CAPITULATION OR STRATEGY?

That sound you heard this past week was the collective hopes of a host of the American hawks being unmercifully smashed as President Bush and his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice offered to enter into direct negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran over that nation's nuclear weapons program. Some very smart and very well-connected people were very upset by Secretary Rice's announcement, which they took as another sign that the Bush administration, despite all the good it has done in combating the global Islamist menace, still doesn't fully understand the nature of the Islamist threat or the Iranian regime's role as the chief propagator of that threat. Naturally, the responses of the respective hawks to the announcement varied, but the following, written by Michael Rubin, editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, was generally representative.

Rice's announcement that U.S. officials were prepared to both offer the Iranian regime new incentives and sit down with it was a strategic fumble. Not only did Rice provide Ahmadinejad with an opportunity to humiliate the "arrogant power" to his domestic audience, but she also undercut what little international credibility the U.S. retains.

On its surface, the U.S. initiative was traditional diplomacy. Rice offered both carrots and sticks: "We are agreed with our European partners on the essential elements of a package containing both the benefits if Iran makes the right choice, and the costs if it does not." But the devil is in the details. The stick—if Iran remains noncompliant—is a vague European and Russian commitment to consider sanctions at the United Nations. What specific sanctions? Not decided. What time frame? Undetermined.

Should Washington trust European and Russian sincerity when it comes to a fundamental threat to U.S. national security?

In Bush's calculation, the worst outcome would be for the Islamic Republic of Iran to possess nuclear bombs. For many Europeans, though, the idea that the U.S. might act forcefully to deny Iran nuclear weapons is a greater threat. And so they encourage an administration more eager to please the international audience than lead it to once again entangle itself in multilateral obfuscation. It is tempting to believe engagement can succeed, but precedent suggests otherwise.

Now let us start by noting a couple of things about Mr. Rubin. First, he is not merely a smart and insightful writer, but is also quite knowledgeable about the Middle East and the related topic of radical Islam. Second, though we don't know Rubin personally, we are familiar with his work. Moreover, his colleague/boss at the Middle East Quarterly/Middle East Forum, Daniel Pipes, is both a friend of The Political Forum and one of the world's foremost scholars of all things Middle Eastern. In other words, Rubin knows what he's talking about, and it is only with considerable trepidation that we would challenge his conclusions on matters Middle Eastern. Yet that is what we are about to do.

Certainly, those who are upset by the apparent shift in the Bush administration's tactics are right on a number of points. Yes, Ahmadinejad will attempt to portray the offer as weakness on the Americans' part. And yes, there is a risk that some of the dissident groups that are counting on American support may be dismayed by what they perceive to be capitulation. And yes, it is incredibly naïve to believe that the Iranians would negotiate in good faith and would live up to the terms of any agreement reached.

Of course, this last point only matters if one presumes that Bush, Rice, and company actually intend to negotiate seriously with the Iranians or intend to take the Iranians at their word. On both counts, we doubt strongly that that is what the President and his Secretary of State have in mind. It is far more likely, in our opinion, that Bush and Rice made the

offer because there was absolutely no risk whatsoever that it would be accepted; because they know that it is important for purposes of both domestic and international consumption that they be seen as at least making an effort, understanding full well that that effort will be spurned.

Ironically, this very explanation of the policy shift was offered by former Reagan national security aide Michael Ledeen, himself one of the most knowledgeable students of Iranian politics and one of the most skeptical of “appeasement” efforts. Immediately after Secretary Rice’s announcement, Ledeen wrote:

[T]here is an alternative explanation, which I invoke in the interests of intellectual curiosity. It may be that the president is playing out the diplomatic string, just as he did with Saddam, expecting that our enemy will save us from the foolishness of our diplomats and our allies. He may expect, as I do, that this offer will be spat upon by the mullahs. He can then go to the UN and demand serious action, expecting that the Russians and/or the Chinese will gut any serious sanctions. At that point he can say, as he did with Saddam, well I tried all the diplomatic solutions, so now I’m going to get serious.

Now, Ledeen conceded that such an explanation is hypothetical and that he has “no reason to think that’s in the president’s mind.” For our part, we’re not sure that what’s in the President’s mind matters a whole lot, since whether or not this was the *intended* outcome, it appears that it will be the outcome nonetheless.

Indeed, the immediate Iranian response to the olive branch offered by Bush and Rice was precisely as Ledeen predicted; they “spat upon” it. Ahmadinejad rejected any preconditions for negotiation, arguing that his nation had a “right” to enrich uranium. And the real powerbroker in Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, took Ahmadinejad’s comments one step further, warning that even the threat of sanctions

(the stick in the Bush/Rice “carrot and stick” offer) would result in possibly severe damage to Persian Gulf energy supplies.

Media observers looking for a reason to keep hope alive noted that neither Ahmadinejad nor Khomeini had explicitly closed the door on the idea of negotiations with the United States, but this is more wishful thinking than anything else. The bottom line here is that the Iranian regime simply cannot accept any détente with the United States. While Western observers would see acceptance of an offer to negotiate as a sign of prudence and flexibility, the Iranians themselves understand that such acceptance could be seen in the Islamic world as a sign of weakness, of submission to terms dictated by the Great Satan himself. And given both its ultimate ambitions and its precarious domestic situation, the last thing the Islamic Republic can afford at this point is even the hint of weakness.

Last week, in these pages, we noted that the Iranian regime has been under increasing internal pressure from both political and ethnic dissidents. One would expect that these protests would eventually generate some sort of mainstream media coverage in this country, particularly given the fact that Iran is the focus of so much attention right now. But thus far, the press continues to ignore this potentially enormous news story. Fortunately, the traditional media no longer have a monopoly on information and thus the Iranian regime’s efforts to keep news of its problems quiet have largely failed. On Friday, Today.AZ, an Azeri news site, reported the following (with our apologies for their imperfect English translations):

According to reports from Iran over 10,000 people demonstrated on Wednesday in Tabriz, provincial capital of East Azerbaijan, despite undeclared marshal [sic] law. People took to the streets of central Tabriz chanting anti-regime slogans, NCRI informs.

Special guards intervened to disperse the crowd but they faced stiff resistance which led to clashes in many parts. According to

eye witness accounts the sound of fire arms did not stop throughout the demonstration which lasted for hours. People attacked banks and other government buildings and broke their windows . . . Similar protests were reported in Orumieh, Naghadeh and Ardabil, major cities in Azeri speaking provinces in northwestern Iran.

On Saturday, the news was even more dramatic. Again, according to Today.AZ (emphasis added):

Azerbaijanis are staging protest actions in Tabriz, Sulduz, Miyane, Ardabil, Urmia and Zenjan cities in Iran . . . The Iranian authorities brought 20 thousand guards and police forces to Tabriz to disperse the protesters. The South Azerbaijan National Revival Movement (SANRM) Baku bureau spokesman Aghri Garadaghli told APA that there are about ten thousands of protesters in Tabriz. Bloody clashes started between the forces and demonstrators accompanied by firing gun. It is not ruled out that special provokers among the protesters fired gun.

Garadaghli also said that Iranian law enforcement bodies are using torture on the detained Azerbaijani demonstrators making them say that the US and other Western states are behind these protests. **Four protesters died of severe torture in the past two days.**

There was an armed clash between the Iranian military forces and the demonstrators during the protest action in Miyane city. There is no exact information about number of the killed and injured. **According to the latest reports, law enforcement bodies arrested 1,700 Azerbaijani protesters in Tabriz, 1,500 in Ardabil and 1,000 in Tehran.**

And Radio Free Europe reported over the weekend that the ethnic tensions have, indeed, spilled over into massive student protests, which, as we argued last week, is an ominous sign for the regime. To wit:

[D]isturbances involving university students are picking up. In the past week several student leaders have been detained by plainclothes security personnel and are being held at unknown locations. Such incidents follow protests triggered by the Iranian government's increasing interference in campus affairs.

What all of this suggests is that the Iranian regime is in trouble. It is impossible to say how serious this trouble is, but one can rest assured that the Mullahs understand full well that any hint of capitulation on their part will serve only to encourage the dissidents. History has shown time and time again that the point at which mass protests become outright revolution is when the protestors begin to sense the regime weakening. Therefore, we believe it is likely that President Bush's overtures will be met over the next several weeks not with acquiescence from the Mullahs, but with increasing belligerence.

The Mullahs fashion themselves the leaders of the global Islamist movement. They resent the idea that Osama bin Laden could have usurped this title, despite the fact that they have, over time, been far more consistent and equally as deadly in their support of global Islamism. As folks like Rubin and Ledeen have so admirably reminded us over the years, the Iranians are not only the most active and vicious sponsors of terrorism worldwide, but have consolidated their power of late, adding the regime of Boy Assad in Syria to their list of terrorist clients. To acquiesce now would demonstrate a frailty both to Islamists seeking leadership and to the restive Iranians who are tiring of the repression, intellectual and technological stagnation, and economic backwardness that have been the predominant characteristics of the Islamic Republic for more than a quarter century. And such frailty is hardly the image the Mullahs and their figurehead Ahmadinejad can afford to project right now.

On the flip side of this coin, simply by making the offer, President Bush has changed perceptions about his administration's willingness to find a solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis that doesn't involve military confrontation. This change in perceptions has hardly been universal, of course, and is unlikely to be permanent. President Bush bent over backwards to accommodate the "international community," on Iraq, yet was still accused of "rushing to war" and of "cowboy unilateralism." So it is not unreasonable to expect that the political and media elites will blame Bush for everything and credit him for nothing, regardless of the eventual outcome of this latest effort. Nevertheless, the President has, at least on paper, made an effort, and that effort will carry some weight and lend an air of sincerity to his expression of disappointment when the Mullahs finally and unambiguously reject the idea of *détente*.

Does this mean that Bush's ploy was brilliant? Of course not. As nearly every observer on every side of this debate has noted, there are no easy answers to the Iranian problem. Rubin, Ledeen, and the rest are undoubtedly right that the tradeoffs involved in the administration's new posture include allowing the Mullahs to play this as a strategic victory and possibly sending a less than encouraging message to Iranian dissidents who are quite clearly desperate for American support.

The long-term impact of these tradeoffs, of course, depends on the President's state of mind and the administration's collective expectations. If the President actually believes that the Mullahs will negotiate in good faith and if he and his administration are willing to allow them to string this out indefinitely (or until they have a functional bomb), then Rubin and Ledeen's pessimism will prove more than warranted. If, however, the administration does indeed understand the nature of the Iranian regime and is consciously playing the same game the Mullahs have been playing for years, then the prospects are much brighter.

Already, Secretary Rice has signaled that the offer she made last week must be met in a matter "of weeks not months," which, we believe, bodes well. If she is serious, then she and her boss can make their next move in this game relatively quickly, thereby limiting what damage their last move may have done, all the while maintaining their posture of sincerity.

In any case, for the time being the onus for resolving this showdown peacefully has been shifted to the Iranians. While that they may not mean much to a regime populated by overwrought millenarians bent on inducing the return of the 12th Imam, it may mean something to the Bush administration as it tries carefully to cull the domestic and international support it needs for whatever comes next. Whether the President feels it necessary to take out the regime's nukes militarily or believes he can take out the regime itself through a combination of sanctions and support for internal dissidents, it will be invaluable at some point for him to be able to say honestly tried to be diplomatic.

FEAR AND LOATHING IN OHIO.

The current issue of *Rolling Stone*, which was once a magazine about music but which has lately become little more than a forum for anti-Bush axe-grinding, contains a story by Robert Kennedy Jr. in which he suggests that George W. Bush stole the 2004 presidential election. That's right; that's not a typo. Kennedy actually believes that Bush stole both the 2000 and 2004 elections, and that the proof of the latter crime can be seen in the much-discussed divergence between the actual ballot counts and the exit polls.

Now, for the record, we haven't read Kennedy's piece and have no intention of doing so. Robert Jr., for those of you who don't know, is quickly earning a reputation as a conspiracy theorist extraordinaire, willing to allege anything against anyone without

even a hint of proof, if he believes it can in any way benefit him personally or politically. He was last seen recycling the old (and unproven) claims that Thimerosal (a mercury-based preservative used in vaccines) causes autism and alleging (without proof, natch) that the federal government has been covering up the causal link. He is also rather famous/infamous for his unsubstantiated attacks on the Bush environmental record.

Fortunately for us, others have read Kennedy's 2004 election piece and have concluded that it is characteristically dishonest. One of those who suffered through Kennedy's dreck so we wouldn't have to is the blogger Confederate Yankee, whose conclusions about the story we found particularly interesting. To wit:

Kennedy's article was constructed for one reason, and one reason only; to smear a black fiscal and socially conservative candidate that has charisma, integrity, and cross-cultural appeal--in short, a real chance of winning. [Ken] Blackwell defeated Attorney General Jim Petro in the 2006 Republican primary with 56% of the vote, and has been significantly closing the gap with Democratic frontrunner Ted Strickland in recent weeks. Strickland led Blackwell by 16 points in a Rassmussen poll on May 8, but that gap has closed dramatically to just six point in a May 25 UC-Ohio poll.

As Blackwell continues to close in on a candidate that seems increasingly unable to find traction, the Kennedy assault targeting Blackwell's duties in the 2004 President elections seems like nothing less than an attempt to smear a black conservative and attempt to save the 2006 Ohio governorship Strickland seems primed to fumble away.

Ohio Democrats fear a Strickland loss, but the national Democratic Party fears that Blackwell may be in the vanguard of black

conservatives that may cut across racial and party lines, eroding their traditional stranglehold on the black vote.

The reason we found this conclusion so interesting is that it jibes rather nicely with some of what we wrote about the genesis of the Ohio controversy way back in December 2004. In an article about the Democratic Party's demonization of black conservatives, we said the following:

In Ohio, erstwhile Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson has been waging his own war against black conservatives, one less public and even less honest than that waged against Rice and Thomas, but one that is nonetheless equally important and bitter.

As you may know, Jackson, who long ago crossed the line between activist and gadfly, has set up shop in the Buckeye state, ostensibly to challenge the election results there and to "raise awareness" about the alleged vote total peculiarities that a handful of internet and other conspiracy-addled weirdoes insist are evidence that the Bushies stole the election once again. But even the most casual observer can't help but suspect that whining about the sad state of Ohio's election procedures is hardly Jackson's only motive for being in the state.

You see, it just so happens that Ohio's Secretary of State, the man who is responsible for overseeing elections and verifying vote totals and who has therefore become the focus of Jackson's vitriol, is Ken Blackwell, who also just happens to be a black Republican. More to the point, Blackwell is also a very serious early contender for the GOP nomination for Governor of Ohio in 2006 who has, in spite of (or maybe because of) his battles with his state's nearly omnipotent Taft political machine, made himself a favorite of the

right-leaning media and free-market wing of the Republican Party. As such, he has the potential to be a real force in Republican politics over the next decade or so.

Needless to say, this bothers both Jackson and his ideological cohorts on the left to no end. The last thing they need is a powerful and popular black Republican making a name for himself as a tax-cutting man of the people who is proud publicly to embrace conservative values, especially when such a man comes from the important swing state of Ohio. And they will therefore do their very best to discredit him.

In January of this year, in our domestic politics forecast piece, we predicted that at least one of the three black conservatives running for statewide office – Blackwell in Ohio; Lynn Swann, who is running for

governor in Pennsylvania; and Michael Steele, who is running for the U.S. Senate in Maryland – would win his race and thereby completely shake-up the politics of race in this country.

Given this latest high-profile smear attempt, it would appear that of the three, the one whom establishment Democrats fear the most is Ken Blackwell. In our estimation, their fear is more than amply justified. Not only is Blackwell a talented, solid conservative, but he is one who has an excellent chance to win his campaign. He is also, we might add, a good friend of ours and an avid reader of *Politics, Etc.*

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