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THEY SAID IT

If rejecting the relativism constitutes a shot across Islam's bow, that shot also crosses any number of other bows. In the Regensburg speech, the Pope staked out a set of claims about the relationship of man and God that stand in opposition not only to the Islam of Ibn Hazn, but also that of the Protestant Reformers, the Jesus of History crowd, and (an area of particular concern for this pope) post-Christian Europe. The Pope renewed the claims of the Church Universal to have a truth that is transcendent, rather than culturally-bound....

UCLA Law Professor Stephen Bainbridge, "A Shot Across Many Bows," TCS Daily, September 15, 2006.

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A WORTHY SUCCESSOR TO JOHN PAUL II.

Last year, as Pope John Paul II lay dying, those who were to choose his eventual successor had the proverbial weight of the world on their shoulders. They had to ponder not just life without their pontiff, without the man who had led the Church for the better part of three decades, but the sheer enormity of the task of replacing a man who was, in essence, irreplaceable.

The 264th pope was not merely the Bishop of Rome and the head of the world's largest Church, but was also a religious and political figure of virtually unmatched consequence, one of the most important popes in the Church's 2000-year history and one of the bravest and most dynamic men of the 20th century. He was not just the Church's pope; he was the world's pope, in a way that none of his predecessors had been. He had, after all, played a pivotal role in transforming the world, helping in no small measure to break the chains that had bound millions of believers and non-believers alike, ending the brutality of totalitarian communism.

In the execution of his mission, John Paul had, as papal biographer George Weigel noted, "changed the Church's expectations of popes, and the world's too." If ever there was a collection of men in need of divine guidance it was the College of Cardinals. And if ever there was a man who would have enormous shoes to fill, it was the man whom that guidance would lead the Cardinals to choose.

Over the past week, a couple things have become clear. First, the challenges facing John Paul's successor have not been exaggerated. To be sure, Pope Benedict XVI faces challenges that are different from those faced by his predecessor. But these challenges are no less monumental and no less fraught with danger, as well as geopolitical and religious gravity. Second, the College of Cardinals chose wisely indeed, picking a man who appears to be up to facing these enormous challenges.

In February 2005, roughly six weeks before Pope John Paul II died, we tried our best to anticipate the challenges that his successor would face, both in the Church and in the world. In so doing, we drew heavily on the wisdom of the aforementioned George Weigel, who had addressed the subject in some depth with an insider's understanding that few could match. We put it thusly:

In Weigel's estimation, the issues that will dominate the next pontificate include: "the virtual collapse of Christianity in its historical heartland – Western Europe"; "the Church's response to the multi-faceted challenge posed by the rise of militant Islam"; and "the questions posed by the biotech revolution."

Certainly all three will test the next pope appreciably, and certainly all three will require a heroic effort if they are to be successfully addressed. But for the purposes of this short article and for purposes of comparison to the current pope, the most immediately pressing of the three challenges appears to be addressing the "multi-faceted challenge posed by the rise of militant Islam."

As Weigel notes, the question of how best to address radical Islam is one that, like the question of Soviet Communism before it, occupies the attention and imagination of not just the Catholic Church but of "free societies throughout the world." While the world's political leaders (e.g. George W. Bush) address the issue by eliminating threats and encouraging the implementation of political reform, Weigel suggests that the Church, under the leadership of the next pope, will work most effectively to promote solutions to the problem from within religious tradition of Islam, to determine if "Islam can find within its sacred texts and legal traditions the internal resources to ground an Islamic case for important facets

of the free and virtuous society, including religious toleration and a commitment to the method of persuasion in politics."

The gist of Weigel's argument is that the Catholic Church, if it chooses to take a "more forthright approach to [the] manifest aggression" sanctioned by radical Islam will be, essentially, to lead by example. Though clearly the Church never sanctioned the kind of violence currently advocated by some religious leaders within the radical factions of Islam, as Weigel notes, "one can draw a rough (all right, very rough) analogy between pro-civil society Islamic scholars and religious leaders today and those Catholic intellectuals and bishops who were probing toward some sort of intellectual rapprochement with religious freedom and democracy as the *ancien régime* was crumbling in Europe throughout the nineteenth century."

In short, then, the challenge the next pope will face with regard to Islam will be to convince Islamic religious leaders that religion and modernity need not be mutually exclusive, to use the Church's experiences in coming to grips with the modern world as both an example and a model for Islamic renewal, and to adopt a "strategic approach," using the Church's enormous global power to help identify and encourage those Islamic religious leaders who are "best positioned to leverage needed change in their co-religionists' self understanding of Islam's role in public life."

Now, we can't say for certain what the relationship between Pope Benedict and Weigel is, though we suspect the two know each other reasonably well. Weigel has written extensively about the new Pope, just as he did the previous one, and has written authoritatively. In any case, it is clear after the past week that at the very least the two men share an understanding of the problems facing mankind and the Church's role in addressing those problems.

Though you'd never know it from the mainstream press accounts of Pope Benedict's lecture last week and his subsequent clarifications, the address at Regensburg was not an attempt to insult Islam or to stir the pot or even, as the hyper-sensitive "Muslim street" appears to believe, a call for a new Crusade. It was, rather, a public attempt to heighten the consequence of this papacy by addressing the most pressing issues facing the Church and, by extension, the world, namely the crisis of faith in the Church's historical homeland and Islamic radicalism.

Lost in the discussion of the Pope's alleged anti-Muslim slur is the fact that the principal focus of his lecture was the influence on the Church and its teachings of Hellenistic philosophy and the reconciliation between revelation and that philosophy and between faith and reason. The Pope's intention therefore was twofold. First, he sought to counter the modern/post-modern notion that religion and reason are incompatible. And second, he sought to offer Islam an example of how reason and religion might be reconciled, arguing, essentially, "that religion and modernity need not be mutually exclusive."

What this means is that Pope Benedict has, for all intents, opened up a second and perhaps even a third front in the war on terror.

Opponents of the war in Iraq have made much over the past year of the Pope's unwillingness to sanction that war, thereby suggesting that Bush et al. are clearly on shaky moral ground with regard to the fight against radical Islam. But that is a misrepresentation of the Vatican's position, to say the very least.

The truth of the matter is that regardless of his beliefs about the means employed by political leaders to pacify terrorists and terrorist sponsors, Pope Benedict has long been one of the most outspoken and clear-headed clerical critics of terrorism in general and Islamic terrorism in particular. And while certainly there is nothing to suggest that he and President Bush are collaborating in the broader assault on Islamism, his lecture last week does offer evidence that they are working, albeit through radically different means, toward a common end.

At the conclusion of our piece on papal succession last year, we noted that some observers, "including Catholic scholar Jodie Bottum, have rightly noted that the guiding principles in the development of the Bush foreign policy are 'Thomist,' meaning that they derive from those principles articulated by Thomas Aquinas." The Bush Doctrine's heavy reliance on Natural Law and the innate human desire for liberty quite clearly have their philosophical underpinnings in Aquinas, whether the President knows it or not. And what that suggests, we concluded, is that "while President Bush is attempting to establish in the Muslim world political institutions based on the principles of Natural Law, the likely task of the next pope, at least according to George Weigel, will be to encourage the internal development of the philosophical and religious foundation needed to buttress those institutions."

In his lecture at Regensburg, Pope Benedict did precisely as Weigel argued he would. He offered Islam and its leaders the Catholic Church's experience in reconciling seemingly disparate forces of religiosity, modernity, and nonviolence; and he encouraged the internal development of a philosophical and religious foundation that could function nonviolently in the modern world.

Some of the more disingenuous critics of Benedict's lecture have argued that the Pope has little room to criticize Islam for its violence, given his own Church's sometimes violent history. That is absurd, in that that was actually Benedict's point precisely. The Pope argued that a proper understanding of reason and God's nature precludes violence in God's name, with the unstated implication that if Christianity can come to that conclusion, then Islam can as well. Benedict's remarks were hardly the attack on Islam they've been made out to be, but rather a sincere and confident offer of inter-faith dialogue.

Of course, it should not go unnoted that the primary target of the Pope's remarks was not Islam, but largely atheistic Europe. Again, as Weigel predicted and Benedict appears to understand, the reconciliation of faith and reason is as vitally important for the secular humanists of what was once called Christendom as it

is for Islam. The belief that religion and reason are incompatible has dominated European thought for four hundred years, has largely destroyed the faith of most of the continent's citizens, and is, in Benedict's formulation, entirely false. Only by convincing the secularists that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive but are, indeed, mutually reinforcing does the Pope believe that he can carry out his mission to reverse what Weigel calls "the virtual collapse of Christianity in its historical heartland."

Recently, Henry Kissinger, the archetypical realist, argued that a "war of civilizations" between Islam and the West is inevitable unless the Europeans waken from their slumber to take an active role in 21st century geopolitics. Specifically, he wrote: "[A] common Atlantic policy backed by moderate Arab states must become a top priority, no matter how pessimistic previous experience with such projects leaves one. The debate sparked by the Iraq war over American rashness versus European escapism is dwarfed by what the world now faces."

While Kissinger and Pope Benedict might not be natural allies, they both seem to be getting at the same basic truth: Europe is doomed unless it embraces its history and culture – *including its religious culture* – and responds responsibly, rationally, and liberally to the threat posed by radical Islamism.

The interesting thing here is that while the Pope's actual words by themselves may not have had a terribly serious effect on the majority of Europeans, it is possible that the Muslim world's reaction to those words will. While there will always be secularist multi-culti fanatics, who will wallow in the Church's tribulations, there are also many western Europeans who, despite their secularism, still bear a largely latent emotional attachment to the Catholic Church and its place in their national histories. And we can think of no more surefire way to awaken that dormant sentimentality and thus to open the admittedly slim possibility of a religious awakening than for radical Muslims to continue their campaign of intimidation and violence directed at the Church, its Pope, and lesser clergy.

A lot of ink has been spilled by various analysts and commentators over the past few months comparing the current geopolitical situation to that which obtained in Europe in 1938. While we're not particularly big fans of such comparisons, we would argue that it would be more apt to highlight the similarities between today and 1981. Then, as now, the American President and the British Prime Minister stood virtually alone in the world in open and aggressive defiance of the totalitarian threat of the day. They were, of course, joined in this battle by the Pope, a man who shared neither their vocation nor their overt political station but who did share their conception of evil and who was rewarded for his resoluteness with the totalitarian's enmity and its promise to silence him permanently.

Some hawkish commentators in this country have lamented the fact that Pope Benedict offered some words of conciliation to his detractors over the weekend, arguing that apologizing would not mollify the radicals and might, actually, encourage them. Such concerns, while understandable, misconstrue both the burdens that the Pope bears and the ultimate aims of the dialogue he began at Regensburg.

If, for example, the Pope were the only one in harm's way because of the misinterpretation of his comments, it is doubtful that he would offer much explanation. But he is not. And with Islamists burning churches and slaughtering clergy, the Pope obviously felt he had an obligation to ensure that his words were understood as precisely as possible so as not to damage the Church's broader mission. More to the point, the lecture last week was, quite clearly, intended to be the opening of a long and, hopefully productive discourse on reason, religion, and the modern world. If he did not seek to ensure that his words were taken as they were intended, then his attempt – and the appalling consequences of that attempt – would all be for naught.

In any case, one should make no mistake that Pope Benedict understands both the challenges he and the Church face and what it means to be the successor to the heroism of John Paul II. His lecture at Regensburg demonstrated that amply.

THE PERFECT POLITICAL STORM.

We are generally optimistic here at The Political Forum. And why not? Optimism makes sense when one is in the business of writing about the greatest country in the world. But this week, we are going to raise some concerns we have about a disturbing confluence of political circumstances that could occur during the period between the upcoming November elections and the presidential race two years hence. Our unease is purely speculative. But we thought it was worth mentioning as the time approaches. So here goes.

It is a sign of President Bush's solid hold on the reins of power and his determination to do what he thinks is right that the national conversation over the future course of the war in Iraq generally focuses on two alternatives, these being that either the President's democratization plan will continue to be the blueprint for the effort until it works, or it will fail and the United States will be forced to withdraw in disgrace as it did in Vietnam. The second alternative is an unsettling one, but it seems distant enough to be discounted, if not ignored, which has allowed the public and the financial markets a degree of comfort about the future, if not certainty.

When one reflects on this circumstance, however, two things become apparent. The first is that neither of these outcomes is the most likely one. And the second is that this will become evident sometime early next year when the 2008 presidential sweepstakes begins in earnest.

At that time, George W. Bush will become the first lame duck president since Calvin Coolidge who will have no one in the race to succeed him who is intimately associated with the policies of his presidency and as such obligated to defend them. Silent Cal didn't need anyone. He and his policies were enormously popular during his year and a half as a lame duck. The same cannot be said about George Bush. One result of this is that the national dialogue on the war in Iraq is going to change dramatically next year. And this will open up a whole new range

of possible outcomes over which the public, the politicians, the pundits, and the financial markets can worry.

President Bush's views and influence will still be important, of course. But myriad alternatives for how to conduct the war and pursue the peace in the Middle East will pour forth from the presidential hopefuls like ink from a squid. It is worth noting that all of these plans, including those from President Bush's fellow Republicans, are likely to be accompanied by both implicit and explicit criticism of the President's handling of post-war Iraq, and none are likely to include a long-term commitment to the "democratization" initiative.

Early frontrunners, like John McCain and Miss Hillary, will be in no hurry to commit to a specific approach. But presidential hopefuls with either poor name recognition or minimal public support, like John Kerry, Joe Biden, Mitt Romney, Bill Frist, Mark Warner, Chris Dodd, Rudy Giuliani, George Allen, Wesley Clark, John Edwards, Bill Richardson, and Newt Gingrich will all try to establish their presidential *bona fides* early with detailed accounts of what Bush did wrong in Iraq and what they would do now to rescue the situation. And a grand debate will ensue.

This debate will go on for two years. During this time, it will become apparent to the entire world that America's long-term policy in the Middle East is no longer a question of Bush's way or the highway, as the saying goes. It will become apparent that the future of American policy is very much in play, that a new approach is going to be pursued by a new president, with a different agenda, a different calculus for deciding friend/enemy designations, a different view toward risk taking, a different notion concerning the role of the military, and a different set of senior officials and foreign policy advisers, all with different views and priorities than Dick, Don and Condi. More importantly, it will become apparent that no one will have any solid basis for determining how things will change or who will be in charge of implementing these changes.

Each of the many presidential wannabes will be playing directly to the prejudices of a well-defined segment of the public whose support he or she will need in order to win in the early primary races. Each will be constantly adjusting his or her message based on polling data, the geographical local of the primary or primaries that are being conducted at the time, and the positions of the remaining opponents. None will be all that interested in how their plans and promises are playing in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Europe, China, Russia, or at the United Nations for that matter.

Some of these candidates will advocate pulling troops out of Iraq as quickly as possible. Others will talk of partitioning Iraq, of negotiating with America's enemies, of taking a more aggressive military approach, of broadening the war to include Iran and Syria, of working more closely with America's traditional allies. Still others will advocate a more antagonistic approach to those nations that President Bush views as allies, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and even Pakistan. Certainly, the Republican candidates will, as a whole, treat President Bush more gently than the Democrats. But when the going gets tough, the GOP "stars" will leave the President to defend his own record.

Finally, each candidate will be supported by a host of "experts" from a wide variety of venues, including the military, think tanks, academia, politics, and the media. Some, like Colin Powell and Madeleine Albright, will be well known and carry considerable weight in certain circles.

Needless to say, this debate among America's political elites (for what else would you call those who are in the running for the highest office in the land?) will create uncertainties throughout the Middle East and the world. Iraqis, for example, may become less confident about America's long-term support for their existing government and react by either abandoning it or joining the assaults upon it. Iranians may await the election of a less aggressive president before taking the final step to development of a nuclear bomb, or they might take advantage of what they

perceive as disunity in America to publicly declare their membership in the nuclear club. The leaders of the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan might become quite nervous about their future relations with the United States and begin covering their bets in a variety of ways that are not in the best interests of the United States. And the leaders of militant Islam will use the debate as a recruiting tool by citing it as evidence that their long-term plan to defeat America is working.

President Bush's critics are fond of describing him as a "stupid cowboy," unpredictable and prone to unilateral action, dangerous to the entire world. What they are going to learn soon is that he is a paragon of constancy, a veritable multilateralist, and a calming influence on the world when compared to the hotspurs that are going to be competing for his job in the next two years.

We have no idea how this is going to turn out. The one thing that is clear is that there will be no one in the race to defend the course that the President is pursuing at the time that the race is going on. Indeed, the day-to-day situation in Iraq and the Middle East will be the stage upon which each of those who would be president will make the case that without the benefit of his or her infinite wisdom all will be lost.

In short, in the last two years of his presidency President Bush will be conducting the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, and the overall war against militant Islam in the midst of a political debate in which it is very likely that all participants from both parties will be attempting to make themselves look good by attacking him. And as we said last week, this will be occurring at a time when the entire Democratic Party establishment will be heavily influenced by the Soros-moveon.org.-Daily Kos-Sheehan-Moore-Pelosi wing of the party, flush with money and determined to make the antiwar movement the focal point of the entire election.

We are not prone to Vietnam analogies when it comes to Iraq. But it is worth keeping in mind that while the Tet offensive in Vietnam was a military disaster for the

enemy, it was regarded by the American public at the time as a decisive defeat for the United States because it was presented to them through the prism of the antiwar movement.

Not surprisingly, Walter Cronkite and the *New York Times* were instrumental in this process. In February 1968, Cronkite, dressed up in a steel military helmet and looking exceedingly grim, declared in a highly unusual, on-the-air editorial that the United States was “mired in a stalemate” and that the “only rational way out” was to negotiate “not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.” Had he been a reporter, rather than a simple “talking head,” Cronkite might have told the truth, which was that the Tet offensive had had a devastating impact on the enemy’s ability to continue the fight.

A month later, the *New York Times*, equally unconcerned about the facts, published the details of a memo that a disgruntled Pentagon employee had leaked to them. The memo, which was written by General Westmoreland, asked for additional troops in order to launch a massive counterattack as a way of taking advantage of the huge losses that had been suffered by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. In a front page, three-column-banner story in the Sunday edition, the *Times* portrayed the memo as

evidence that America was all but defeated. And the public bought it.

This is, of course, ancient history and possibly of no relevance. Our concern is that President Bush could well find himself in similar circumstances, and that he will be no more successful in defending his position against the *New York Times*, Katie Couric, George Soros, and a host of antagonistic presidential candidates, including many from his own Party, than Lyndon Johnson was against a lesser force.

Time will tell. As we said last week, President Bush will be all right if all goes well. But if the United States suffers a serious military reversal in Iraq or Afghanistan during the next two years, or if terrorists succeed in another attack like September 11 or worse, or if the President is compelled to act in response to the threat from Iran or North Korea, or if the insurgents in Iraq can stage their own Tet offensive, then this nation could be in trouble. At that point, the confluence of forces either directly antagonistic to President Bush or fearful of joining his side in the fight could overwhelm the limited resources available to him, a lame duck president whose only support comes from a handful of ordinary citizens who still appreciate the courage, vision, and steadfastness he displayed during a very difficult period in the nation’s history.

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