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THEY SAID IT

The port town of Veracruz is a little purgatory between land and sea for the traveler, but the people who live there are very fond of themselves and the town they have helped to make. They live as initiates in local custom reflecting their own history and temperament, and they carry on their lives of alternate violence and lethargy with a pleasurable contempt for outside opinion, founded on the charmed notion that their ways and feelings are above and beyond criticism.

--Opening paragraph of *Ships of Fools*, Katherine Ann Porter, 1962.

In this Issue

Ship of Fools.

SHIP OF FOOLS.

For the past couple of weeks or so, it has seemed that everyone in Washington is deadly serious. Serious about child predators. Serious about abuse of power. Serious about intimidation and dereliction of duty. Serious. Serious. Serious. It's more than a little ironic, then, that for all the appearances of sincerity, earnestness, and gravity, the events of the last two weeks have demonstrated conclusively that no one in Washington understands any longer what it means to be truly serious or even what circumstances and events should be taken seriously. In less than a month, the nation will vote in national elections that could affect the composition and course of government at a time when that very government is waging war on behalf of its citizenry. Yet no one involved in this important event appears to be even nominally serious about the issues or the stakes involved.

Now we're sure that this charge could probably be made with some degree of accuracy during every election cycle. Someone somewhere is always going to be unhappy that some specific issue is not receiving the attention it so obviously deserves. But it seems to us that this election actually represents something different. Not only are the stakes exceptionally high, given the effect that the election results will have on President Bush's ability to continue to wage the war on terror, but the level of frivolity among the relevant players strikes us as particularly elevated as well.

It is not just that we've been put off by the whole Mark Foley affair and the subsequent national obsession over who knew what and when about Foley's penchant for youngsters, though that is part of it. It is that both parties and all factions within both parties, plus the candidates and the media, all seem to be concerned about things that don't matter all that much. Meanwhile, the things that do matter are largely ignored.

To make matters worse, the discussions that have taken place among the political elites on the left, right, and everywhere in between portend bad things, not just for the country, but for the respective parties and individuals involved as well. We'll gladly grant that politics is a game that doesn't always make sense. But even stipulating that, it seems to us that all of the players in this game are intent upon damaging themselves, their causes, and the ability of the nation to function effectively at a time when effective functioning would seem to be especially important.

Let's start, for example, with the Democratic Party. While it might seem at first blush that the Foley "scandal" – if that's the appropriate term – is election manna for them, we can't help but think that their over-the-top hand-wringing and insistence that the whole mess says something fundamental about the nature of Republican governance are not merely foolish but ultimately self destructive as well.

Dozens of right-leaning columnists, commentators, and pundits have already noted the rank hypocrisy at play here, with the party of Gerry Studds, Barney Frank, Bill Clinton, and Mel Reynolds attacking its opponents for insufficient sexual decorum and unwillingness to punish those guilty of breaching that decorum. There's no arguing this point. Those who live in glass houses where they actually have physical contact with underage pages, high school campaign volunteers, and post-adolescent interns and from which they run gay prostitution rings should be careful about throwing stones.

But the ridiculousness of the Democrats' faux indignation goes far beyond mere sex scandals. For two years now, the Democrats have, laughably, tried to make the case that Republicans are hopelessly corrupt and should therefore be removed from power. It didn't matter much to them that Nancy Pelosi ran fund-raising schemes that were notably similar to those for which they berated Tom DeLay. And it didn't matter that Harry Reid had taken funds just as greedily as any Republican from disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff and his clients. The "culture of corruption" was the theme they settled on, and they beat it into the ground.

And while this "culture of corruption" campaign fizzled badly, the Foley affair has breathed new life into the old bones, allowing Pelosi, Reid, Howard Dean and the rest to wax hysterical once again about Republican sleaze. It's possible that this time their incessant gibbering might be enough to tip the scales back in their party's favor this November. Who knows? But even if that's the case, it won't be because anyone anywhere actually takes them seriously. The American people may have a short collective attention span and a short collective memory, but neither is so short that they have already forgotten the traveling sleaze-circus that ruled the country during the 1990s. Nor, for that matter, have they forgotten the Democrats' insistence that such ethical "peccadilloes" don't matter.

By choosing to focus their attention on the repellent misbehavior of one member of Congress and by deciding to make that misbehavior the centerpiece of their final pitch to the American people to restore them to the majority, the Democrats are unquestionably opening themselves up to serious future problems. If they want to play a game of "whose members are the biggest perverts?" that's one we're sure the Republicans will eventually win. But that's not even the half of it.

What the Democrats have done is to concede the idea that character matters, the very notion that they spent the entire last decade railing against. Throughout the 1990s, the Democrats insisted that good intentions are all that matters, and that one's personal life is irrelevant, no matter how depraved. They argued that character doesn't count, that what does count is "whom and what one fights for," to paraphrase Bill Clinton. From draft dodging to fleeced Savings and Loans to fraudulent real estate deals; from commodities market rackets to "misplaced" billing records to pilfered FBI files; from illegal fundraising to Chinese arms dealers in the White House to 21-year-old interns "servicing" the President, the Democrats covered for the Clintons on every ground imaginable, arguing simply that none of it mattered since none of it affected the public performance of his job.

They can no longer make that argument with a straight face. They will try, of course, believing that the rules should be applied differently to them. But they won't succeed. Pelosi and Dean may get by for the time being arguing that the personal depravity of one largely irrelevant former legislator should carry greater weight with voters than questions of war, peace, and national security. But they will look ridiculous when they eventually try to revert to the old standard in order to protect one of their own from the consequences of his or her behavior. As the old saying goes, "be careful not to muddy the water around you; you may have to drink it soon."

Over the long run, the biggest loser here, aside from those Democratic members of Congress who may now be caught up in tit-for-tat "outing," is likely to be New York's junior Senator and the presumed frontrunner for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. Her most difficult task in getting herself elected was always going to be convincing the American public to go back to the way things were in the '90s, when the White House was a constant source of entertainment and embarrassment. Now she'll have to do so without the luxury of being able to dismiss out of hand questions about her (and her husband's) non-political behavior. Thanks to Nancy Pelosi, Howard Dean, Harry Reid, their desperation, and their willingness to turn this election into a referendum on Mark Foley, everyone will now be expected to be more forthcoming than the Clintons have ever been. Good luck with that.

For their part, the Republicans are no more serious than the Democrats and are likely to be just as unhappy about the results of their lack of seriousness. And while they've tried (pathetically, if not desperately) to change the subject from Mark Foley and back to graver matters, the fact that Foley's personal behavior is even an issue for anyone other than himself is proof of Congressional Republicans' fundamental decrepitude.

Nearly two years ago, when then-House Majority Leader Tom DeLay was under investigation for fundraising "peculiarities," we suggested that the

Republican Party had an obligation "to hold itself and its officers more strictly accountable to a different standard" of behavior. As the self-appointed guarantors of morality in public life and as the principal advocates of free markets, Republicans have a unique responsibility to demonstrate that men can indeed behave honorably.

This obligation is even more important when the political stakes are as high as they are today. The leaders of the GOP should have understood that they cannot get by with many of the things that Democrats do as a matter of routine. If they truly believe, as they have argued, that there is an enormous and significant difference between themselves and the Democrats on matters of national security, then they should have made it a priority to ensure that something so stupid as the twisted longings of one Congressman would not potentially hand control to the other guys. But they didn't.

Even knowing the high stakes involved, the Republicans in Congress were simply not serious enough to ensure that they could weather one absurd little storm that implicated a single member of their party. In an election in which every seat will likely matter, the party couldn't even convince its most corrupt members and its biggest liabilities (DeLay and Foley) to bow out in time to be replaced on their respective ballots by other candidates. And it has thus handed Democrats two of the fifteen seats they need for control. If and when the Democratic House refuses to fund the war efforts in Iraq or votes to impeach the President, the unserious leaders of the Congressional GOP will bear a significant portion of the blame for making all of that possible.

They won't bear all the blame, of course. Some of it will have to go to those factions within the GOP that are perpetually unhappy with the House and Senate leaders, are convinced that the party must be "punished" for its transgressions, and who are forcefully and consistently advocating abandoning the party specifically to make a point and provide that punishment. Certainly, we are generally sympathetic to those elements within the conservative movement that

believe in smaller government, less federal spending, less regulation, and all of that good stuff. But we can't help but think that their current plans to protest the fact that their ideas have proven unpopular is, at this point, little more than an unserious, self-indulgent tantrum.

There has always been a tension within conservative circles between religious and libertarian factions. But the libertarians are now so upset with what they perceive to be a perpetual slighting of their beliefs and ideas that some are willing to call it quits, thereby breaking up the coalition that has made the GOP the nation's majority party.

Again, there is the matter of what such a split would do to the President and the nation at a crucial point in history. One has to ask the secessionist libertarians if they are willing to lose the war on terror simply because Bush, Hastert, and Frist have been unable or unwilling to cut farm subsidies or reform entitlements. As we said, we're sympathetic to libertarian arguments and find the idea of "big-government" conservatism anathema. But anyone who believes that such matters are more important than preserving the President's ability to fight the war on terror cannot consider himself serious about national security.

More to the point, the courses of action that some libertarians have been exploring to remedy their perceived slight suggests that many of them are not particularly serious about their alleged beliefs either, or about the credibility of their political philosophy.

For some time now, some libertarian-leaning, erstwhile Republicans have been flirting with the idea of embracing the Democratic Party, given that it shares their uneasiness with the Religious Right and their loathing of the political ends associated with religious conservatism. About two weeks ago, this flirtation grew more serious, when Markos Moulitsas, the founder of the influential DailyKos blog and the unofficial leader of the ultra-liberal "netroots" movement, made his pitch for Libertarian-Democrats on the web site of the Cato Institute, arguing in part

that libertarians' discomfort with intrusions "into our bedrooms and churches" makes them natural allies of the Democrats.

Some libertarian leaners responded in kind, seconding Kos's conflation of libertarianism and libertinism. But other, more serious libertarians responded more thoughtfully, though equally unseriously. One, Arnold Kling, an adjunct fellow at Cato, responded by acknowledging that he "can see the possibility of at least a temporary alliance between libertarians and Democrats, provided that both are willing to experiment." And the "experiment" he suggests is quite a doozy. He asks Democrats to support school choice in return for libertarian votes and promises that libertarians will also support single-payer, socialized medicine. Both policies will be adopted on an experimental basis, of course, with concrete empirical evaluations of the programs' relative successes and failures after a period of, say, 15 years.

This is, to put it delicately, nuts. Kling is a libertarian, and a smart one at that. But actually to suggest, as he does, that such "Experimentalism has the potential to be a new political philosophy that transcends partisanship," or that "more Americans could be comfortable with experimentalism than with traditional Democratic or Republican dogma" is unserious at best and more likely insane.

Kling is an adjunct fellow at Cato. Could he not walk down the hall and talk over this plan with the Institute's big cheese, Chairman William Niskanen, who is also one of the nation's most important and respected academic students of bureaucratic and organizational behavior? Could he not have inquired about the fantastical nature of the stipulation that "policies must be evaluated, and if they are found to have failed, they must be abandoned?" Could he not have asked Niskanen the likelihood of "experimentalism" ever succeeding, of government bureaucracies, once established, willingly dismantling themselves because the "experiment" failed, of markets being able to regenerate themselves after government-coerced absence for more than a decade?

As we have argued numerous times in the pages, the bond that holds libertarians and conservatives together despite their manifold policy differences is a fundamental belief in the importance of precedent, of human experience, of multi-generational wisdom in establishing social, moral, and governmental norms of behavior. The idea of “experimenting” with socialism as a trade-off flies in the face of that core belief. In order for a libertarian or anyone else to accept such a scheme, he or she would have to suspend disbelief and presume possible that which has historically proven impossible.

And all of that is in addition to the moral failings inherent in such an experiment. Kling concedes that he is reasonably certain “that if people were to experience single-payer health care for ten or fifteen years, that would provide powerful evidence that it is a bad idea for the United States.” We agree. And as is usually the case, experience shows why this is so.

In single-payer systems, care is rationed, quality is compromised, and people get sick and die from things that would otherwise be treatable. Yet Kling is willing to subject “all residents of the single-payer states and all children subsequently born in those states” to a system that he himself concedes is inferior simply to prove a point. That’s morally unserious to put it mildly.

Again, we sympathize with the libertarians’ plight. But the fact of the matter is that, for a variety of reasons, no one is buying what they’re selling right now. And that’s a function of the political marketplace of ideas. If they want their ideas embraced more wholeheartedly, then they should sell them better. They should create a market for them, a task obviously easier said than done but hardly impossible. Simply selling out and compromising on both important

policy questions and fundamental beliefs will only damage the libertarian wing’s hard-earned credibility. Abandoning the GOP now in a fit of pique will wound both the GOP and the libertarian sub-movement as well.

Unfortunately, we could go on and on with examples of political players who are simply unable or unwilling to be serious at a point in the nation’s history where there should be a premium on seriousness. Here in Virginia, a Senate race between two erstwhile popular and charismatic politicians has degenerated into a contest of “who’s the lesser jackass?” with neither man appearing suited to win. The once affable former Southern governor, current Senator, and presidential hopeful, George Allen, has been transformed, in the opinion of much of the public, into a hatemongering, racist redneck. Meanwhile, his opponent, the erstwhile Secretary of the Navy, philosopher, novelist, historian, and genuine American hero, James Webb, has been painted as an irrational, angry, race-baiting, sexist bully. Irrespective of which man wins, the country loses, as it has now lost two serious and potentially commanding leaders and gained two unserious, obnoxious overgrown adolescents.

And that’s the way it is all over the nation. Times are serious, as we have seen again this morning with the North Korean nuclear test. Yet a great majority of those responsible for leading the nation in these serious times are themselves wholly unserious. The old saw has it that in a democracy people get the government they deserve. Even conceding that the American people are not as serious as they perhaps should be about matters of war and peace, it’s hard to see how they could really deserve the misfits and cranks that make up the bulk of the U.S. Congress today.

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