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## THEY SAID IT

Materialism, among all nations, is a dangerous disease of the human mind; but it is more especially to be dreaded among a democratic people because it readily amalgamates with that vice which is most familiar to the heart under such circumstances. Democracy encourages a taste for physical gratification; this taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that all is matter only; and materialism, in its turn, hurries them on with mad impatience to these same delights; such is that fatal circle within which democratic nations are driven around. It were well that they should see the danger and hold back.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1840.

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## DEMOCRACY LIKELY TO DECIDE IRAQ'S FUTURE.

We heard a great deal from the pundit community last week about a front-page story in the *Washington Times* claiming that the White House is planning to make a “dramatic change in direction” in Iraq soon after the elections next month. White House Press Secretary Tony Snow called the story “a bunch of hooey,” but very few political pundits seemed to believe the denial, and the talk continued all week about the nature of the changes that the President is “certain to make” in the face of “overwhelming evidence” that he “must do something” in light of the “deteriorating situation” there.

Given that this “dramatic change in direction” is supposed to occur soon after the election and that said election is only two weeks away, we won't speculate this week on what changes might be in the works, if any. We will simply borrow Thomas Jefferson's purported response to being asked, when he was a very old man, whether he thought Jesus Christ was the Son of God. He said that he would not “busy” himself with the question, “when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble.”

Instead, we thought we would discuss a related development that is taking place at the current time and which is likely to affect the long-term outcome of the Iraqi war at least as much as whatever President Bush decides to do there in the next few weeks. We are talking about the fact that American policy in Iraq is slowly but ever so surely moving out of the hands of President Bush and into the hands of the American people.

The completion of the first big step in this procedure will take place in two weeks, when voters conduct what amounts to a partial referendum on the President's handling of the conflict. The second phase will begin shortly thereafter and will go on for two years as Americans debate and eventually decide which of the many presidential wannabes is most in tune with the majority opinion of what should be done in Iraq when President Bush leaves office.

During this time, President Bush will, of course, continue to make the day-to-day decisions on handling the war, racing against time to turn his grand vision of a free, stable, democratic, friendly Iraq into a reality, or so close to being a reality that the next president, regardless of party, will have no choice but to recognize it as an important and permanent part of America's Middle East policy.

President Bush may, of course, succeed in achieving this end. But the odds against him are increasing daily. Ironically then, this great believer in democracy is likely to find that the end game in the most important initiative of his entire eight years in the White House will be largely determined by the infinite wisdom of the American people, as expressed through the democratic process of voting. Adding irony to this circumstance is the fact that arguably one of President Bush's greatest problems in the conduct of the war has been his inability to maintain a high degree of public support for it.

Of course, the process by which "the people" will decide is an extremely messy one, involving not only an intense interaction between the public and the politicians, but the ubiquitous and constant presence of the media, the pundit community, and hundreds of organizations, both public and private, together spending millions upon millions of dollars in an effort to affect the outcome.

Because of this, the outcome is impossible to predict with any confidence. Certainly it is more difficult than it would be to determine what President Bush is likely to do in Iraq over the next month or so. But, since everyone else is attempting the latter, we thought we would offer a few comments on the former, not with the goal of forecasting what the American people will ultimately decide they want done in Iraq, but to provide some insights into the parameters of what they are likely to find acceptable.

For starters, it is increasingly apparent, to us anyway, that the vast majority of Americans are not at all interested in suffering any discomfort, financial or otherwise, on behalf of a victory in Iraq. They seem to have no particular problem with spending billions and billions of dollars on the war as long as the money is borrowed. But we doubt seriously that they would go along with a tax increase or large cuts

in other government spending in order to finance the effort. Even a relatively minor financial discomfort, say gasoline at \$3 a gallon or more, would be looked upon as a very high price to pay for the continuation of the war. It would also be viewed as evidence that the politicians in charge of the effort were both stupid and incompetent.

As such, we think it is unlikely that any of the various presidential candidates will propose a larger troop commitment, which would raise the direct cost of the war, or an expansion of the fighting beyond the borders of Iraq, into Syria or Iran, for example.

Of course, the vast majority of Americans do not want to lose the war in Iraq. But this dedication to victory is, we think, overwhelmingly predicated on the belief that their own personal security would be threatened if Iraq were to fall into the hands of Arab radicals. Thus, with the exception of President Bush, we believe that few politicians are likely to extol the benefits of the war on the basis of making life better for Iraqis or spreading the glories of democracy throughout the Middle East. We couldn't prove this, of course, but our guess is that if America's military involvement in Iraq could be discontinued by placing a pro-American tyrant in charge of that country, rather than a popularly elected democrat, a majority of Americans would jump at the chance.

And finally, since talk is cheap, it seems quite probable to us that most of the candidates from both parties will pledge to "go anywhere and talk to anyone" in hopes of reaching an agreement that will allow the United States to leave Iraq without losing too much face, which will probably turn out to be the opening gambit in the end game and the conclusion of America's great adventure in nation building among Arabs.

Last week, the airwaves were filled with pronouncements from Democratic politicians that the United States needs to set a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq in order to force the Iraqi government to take the kind of actions that these Democrats deem necessary to restore order to that country. What none of them, or anyone else for that matter, seem to realize is that a timetable of the very kind they are proposing has already been established and the clock just started ticking.

## VICTORY LOOKS LIKE THIS?

This is the year of the Donkey. Everyone – or almost everyone – agrees. The Democrats have been waiting for a year like this since at least 1994 and, if election forecaster Charlie Cook can be believed, since 1974.

The Republicans are toast. This is the sixth term of the Bush presidency, and, as every schoolboy knows, sixth-year elections are notoriously bad for the president's party. The GOP has been beset by a series of scandals, including one that is sordid and cyber-sexual and another that reached almost to the top of the party, debilitating and eventually destroying the House Majority Leader.

The nation is entrenched in two bloody and problematical wars, for which large segments of the public blame the Republican president. And the Republican base in all its various forms is upset about a perceived abandonment of core conservative principles. This, it would seem, is Washington's version of "the perfect storm." Political analysts and pundits of all ideological stripes appear to have taken up the point made first by former Clinton political guru James Carville back in August that if Democrats "can't win in this environment, we have to question the whole premise of the party."

So what if they don't win? Or even, for that matter, what if they do? We're not at all certain that it will make a long-term difference in the broader political scheme, either way. For a handful of reasons, we can't shake the feeling that the Democrats are like an obsessed bride, strategizing, planning, dreaming, scheming, and preparing endlessly for the wedding, but never giving a second's thought to the marriage that will follow. Of course, we remain skeptical about the Democrats' chances of pulling off this big, fabulous wedding, but if they do, we think they should enjoy their moment in the sun, for the marriage that follows is going to be rocky indeed.

Now, we are well aware that we are in a distinct minority here; that most political observers would, if they were aware that we exist, tell us that we're out of our minds, that we have this entirely backward. After all, everyone knows that the Grand Old Party is in disarray. The coalition is collapsing. "The base"

is abandoning the President. The religious nuts and libertarian wackos hate each other and hate Congress more. The finger pointing has already begun and is all but certain to get worse after November 7. *The New York Times* put it this way last week:

With polls showing Republican control of Congress in jeopardy, conservative leaders are pointing fingers at one another in an increasingly testy circle of blame for potential Republican losses this fall . . .

Whether the election will bear out their pessimism remains to be seen, and the factors that contribute to an electoral defeat are often complex and even contradictory. But the post-mortem recriminations can influence politics and policy for years after the fact . . .

In the case of the Republican Party this year, the skirmish among conservatives over what is going wrong has begun unusually early and turned unusually personal. But almost regardless of the outcome on Nov. 7, many conservatives express frustration that the party has lost its ideological focus.

We understand all of this and are more than willing to concede that, win or lose, Republicans will be doing a great deal of soul searching over the next couple of years. That notwithstanding, for the folks at the *New York Times* to talk about the trials and tribulations of conservatism is a little like Bill Clinton offering a priest advice on maintaining his vow of celibacy. Neither the *Times* nor any of the others who have advanced similar arguments have any idea what's going on in the Republican Party. They understand neither the nature of the tensions among factions nor the challenges that those tensions pose. As we've noted time and time again, the Republican coalition has been cracking up for nearly three decades now, yet somehow the ultimate collapse never occurs.

This is not to say that the GOP doesn't have problems. It does. The fact of the matter is that Republicans in Washington, D.C. and in many state capitals as well (for example, the Taft crowd in Columbus, Ohio) have

betrayed the party, its core principles, and its various constituencies. And this problem is big enough that it might allow the Democrats to seize control of a part of the government again after a 12-year hiatus.

But that's not the entire story. For all that is wrong with the GOP, there are still some things that are right with it. There is still some good news for Republicans.

The most significant piece of good news is that despite this immense mess, there is surprisingly little dissension among the various Republican factions as to what the GOP *should* stand for. Almost everyone seems to agree, at least in principle, that the party should be dedicated to smaller, less intrusive government; lower taxes and regulatory burdens; less government spending; self reliance; free markets; personal responsibility and individual ownership; traditional values, and a strong national defense. The problem is trying to figure out how to apply these beliefs to government in the face of a leery electorate, the temptations of power, the post-modern assault from the left, the pre-modern assault from radical Islam, and, most important, the inexorable rise of the bureaucratic state.

Again, this is not a problem to take lightly. This is serious stuff, and one could argue quite reasonably that some or all of the concerns noted above (especially the rise of the bureaucratic state) may make conservative governance exceptionally difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, we realize that we're papering over some serious and perhaps irreconcilable differences among various party factions. Even so, for the most part, the GOP is not divided over the party's ideal core beliefs. Rather it is divided over the best means to achieve the most consistently conservative policies and where the blame should be placed for the rather severe shift away from those policies over the last 12 years.

None of this can be said with regard to the Democrats. As we noted last week, and countless times before then, this is a party that has no idea what it believes, what its core principles are, what direction it would like to lead the country if it were permitted to do so, and no hope of figuring any of this out in the near future.

The Democratic Party's only notable political success in the last four decades came as it rallied behind a centrist who endorsed the death penalty, cut taxes on capital gains, reformed welfare, and declared the "era of big government" over. Yet in the six years since Bill's exit from the national stage, the party has done precious little other than run away from this agenda. Carville says that a loss should cause his fellow Democrats "to question the whole premise of the party." That's true. But neither he nor anyone else seems to have any idea what "premise" he has in mind.

The Democrats have spent the last six years defining themselves principally as "not George Bush." And while there is a chance that that strategy will yield short-term results this November, it is hardly the foundation of future political success, given that in the next election, every candidate from both parties will be "not George Bush."

Irrespective of what happens in the midterm, Democrats will have to make a choice. They can either continue to wage political war against a man who is politically irrelevant or they can dedicate themselves to figuring out what they stand for rather than whom they stand against. Since the latter would necessitate both a frank and vigorous debate over values and expectations among partisan factions not particularly keen on debate and some concessions to overwhelming public sentiment on issues that are considered inviolable by party elites, we suspect that the party will choose the former, preferring to attack the lame-duck president rather than redefine its own identity.

What this means is that even if the Democrats win next month, their success is likely to be fleeting. The Democratic Party's "premise" is not going to be any more workable or any more palatable to the majority of Americans just because Republicans turned out to be unreliable. Serious analysts and scholars will almost certainly view any victory as a one off event, not a realignment.

Election authority Michael Barone noted recently that true political realignments "occur because of events that have deep demographic impact and when one

party stands for new ideas that command majority support.” And there is nothing to suggest that either condition obtains at this point in time. *National Journal’s* “Hotline” argued last week that “It’s not clear whether any swing voter backs a new Dem agenda.” And Barone himself has said that Democrats really have “had a hard time coming up with” policy ideas.

One thing appears certain. Whether Democrats take back Congress or not, the far left wing of the party is likely to be strengthened after November 7. If the Democrats retake the majority in either or both houses, the left (the so-called “net roots”) will claim credit. If they remain in the minority, the left will argue that things could have been different, if only the party had fully committed to a more leftist tack.

A victory will ensure that Nancy Pelosi, the aggressive liberal from San Francisco, will become Speaker of the House and thus one of the nation’s most prominent political figures. This will all but guarantee that the Democratic Party will move further and further away from the political mainstream on a host of agenda items dealing with both domestic policy and foreign affairs. And this will not sit especially well either with voters or with a great many moderate/conservative Democrats, some of whom are already uneasy with the direction of their party.

Last week, *The Washington Times* reported that several House Democrats are worried about Pelosi and the direction of her leadership. “At least one Democratic House candidate has pledged not to support Mrs. Pelosi,” reporter Charles Hunt began, “and others in conservative districts have refused to commit their support – potentially leaving Mrs. Pelosi shy of the 218 votes required for the chamber’s top post.” We tend to believe that this concern has been exaggerated and that Pelosi will be the Speaker in the event of a Democratic takeover. But the open and unabashed dissension in the Democratic ranks is, we believe, telling.

The truly troubling thing for Democrats is that while the party’s leadership and monied interests continue to move leftward, especially on matters of national security, any gains the party makes this November will be due in large part to the emergence of new conservative voices within its midst. *National Journal’s*

“Hotline” noted last week that “many of the new Democrats in the House will hail from Red or Dark Purple states,” and “they are also likely to be marginally more conservative than the Democratic mean.”

Most of the likely new Democrats in the Senate will be well to the left of center. But two of the most prominent prospective Senators would, if they were to win, be among the most conservative Democrats around. Jim Webb, who is challenging George Allen in Virginia, is only nominally a Democrat. He served President Reagan as Secretary of the Navy and was, until a couple of years ago, a prominent Virginia Republican, endorsing his opponent, Senator Allen, both when he ran for governor in 1993 and when he ran for Senate just six years ago. More to the point, Webb is a Marine who is notably hawkish, despite his outspoken opposition to the Iraq war. His pre-campaign positions on most issues, especially national defense, would most accurately be characterized as “paleo-conservative” rather than any stripe of liberalism.

And then there is Harold Ford, the Democratic hopeful from Tennessee. Though there’s no doubt that the Democrats would love to recapture a seat in the old South, the election of Mr. Ford would complicate any effort the party might undertake to reestablish its identity. A number of conservatives, notably Rich Lowry, the editor of *National Review*, have noted that Ford appears to have “broken the code” and given Democrats a blueprint for winning in the conservative South. And while that is certainly true, this blueprint involves a whole host of policy positions that are anathema to the Democratic Party’s ascendant factions. More to the point, it is impossible to look at Ford’s candidacy without acknowledging the fact that he is not merely a Democrat running as a conservative, but a *black* Democrat running as a conservative.

Certainly, it is a little unfair to burden Ford with the expectation that he will alter the way in which all black voters view the political landscape. But there is little doubt that he represents a new wrinkle in American politics. In order to appeal to a statewide constituency, Ford has had to tailor his pitch, adopting policy positions that go beyond the parochial interests historically targeted by black liberals. He is, to put it

bluntly, far more mainstream. And while he has been preceded into the mainstream by Illinois Senator (and current media darling) Barack Obama, Ford's election, should it happen, would be even more significant than was Obama's, since the seat he would occupy is in the old South. To win in Tennessee, a candidate must be far more mainstream and far more conservative than a candidate in Illinois must.

We've been predicting for years now that eventually black conservatives would emerge to put an end to the narrow, condescending, presumptive politics that has characterized the Democrats' pitch to the black community for roughly half-a-century. And while Ford and his allies might object to our suggestion that he represents the vanguard of such a movement, we can't see how his very presence in the Senate would be anything but a threat to the old guard liberals.

Harold Ford, Jr. may or may not win a Senate seat from Tennessee, but he will, at the very least, garner nearly half the votes cast in one of the most conservative states in the nation. That presents a problem for Republicans to be sure, but, in our opinion, it presents an even bigger problem for the liberal Democratic establishment and the even more liberal netroots.

This last point, we think, is a good one on which to end. The election in two weeks is unquestionably shaping up to be problematic for the GOP. But it is also shaping up to be problematic for the Democratic Party as well, and those problems will not necessarily be eased, even if the Dems re-capture both houses of Congress.

The media cliché this year has been that the election will be the mirror image of 1994; it will be the election in which Democrats stage their own counter-revolution and take back the Congress and the country. We just don't see that happening.

We tend to agree with those few pundits who have suggested that if there is a precedent for this election, it can be found in the midterm contest of 1986. That was the election in which the GOP lost 9 of the 12 Senate seats it had gained by riding on Reagan's coattails six years prior and handed control of the upper chamber back to the Democrats. After the GOP's drubbing, Democrats and the media alike proclaimed an end to Reagan's conservative revolution and a restoration of the liberal order. Of course, it was only eight years later that Newt and company extended the Gipper's revolution, taking back both houses for the first time in 40 years.

This time around, we have serious doubts about the ability of conservatism to rally, even five, ten, fifteen years down the road. But we have even greater doubts about liberalism's ability to rally. We're not sure who will be in control of Congress when it reconvenes next January, but we are sure that the Democrats will not be in control of the country.

Any change in the majority this year will be premised on a GOP collapse rather than a Democratic resurgence. With only two weeks to go before election day, there is still considerable doubt about the Democrats' ability to stage a significant victory – or any victory at all. And under the circumstances, that's a sign of weakness, not strength.

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