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THEY SAID IT

It is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war....Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war...the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building, no instrument of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty brutish, and short.

--Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651.

THEN AGAIN, AMERICA MIGHT JUST GIVE UP.

Throughout recorded history, losing a war has been one of the most devastating experiences that a country can suffer. Indeed, history books are replete with stories of great city-states, such as Troy and Carthage, being wiped from the very face of the earth in the aftermath of a lost war, and powerful empires, such as those of Austria and Spain, being permanently reduced to mere shadows of their former selves by defeat in battle.

From this perspective, the United States has been fortunate. This great super power has lost only one war and that was a melancholy event for most Americans and, oddly enough, a cause for celebration by others. For the most part, life at home went on as usual in the immediate aftermath of America's abrupt exit from Saigon, even as the blood poured from the tens of thousands of unfortunate individuals who were left behind.

It is not clear yet whether the United States will, in the not too distant future, lose a second war in a far off land. As we said a few weeks ago, our "working assumption" is that it will. President Bush maintains that he is determined to keep U.S. troops fighting in Iraq "as long as necessary." But, for a variety of reasons, we remain skeptical about the outcome.

For starters, the daily reports from Iraq are reminiscent of the divine Emperor Hirohito's plaintive remarks following the destruction of two Japanese cities by atomic bombs. "The war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage," he said. Then there is the troubling fact that the entire focus of the national dialogue about the war has become how to get out of it rather than how to win it. Needless to say, this is not a confidence builder. And finally, it looks as though the Iraq Study Group has concluded that the

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answer to the question that it was asked to address begins with the phrase, “on the one hand,” and ends with the phrase “on the other hand,” which basically means that these representatives of the nation’s best and brightest are as useless as those who put them up to the task. Perhaps next time, Congress should seek the help of Madame Sosostriis, “famous clairvoyant.” “I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.”

In the meantime, President Bush, Dick Cheney, Condi Rice, Jim Baker, and maybe even “Bobby” over at the Pentagon will talk and talk to anyone who will listen to them, including our “friends” the Russians and the Chinese; our potential partners in seeking a pathway to peace, namely the Iranians and the Syrians; the pudden’heads in Europe; and, of course, the Saudi “royal family,” which continues to bankroll much of the bloodshed in Iraq as well as Muslim violence around the world. But it won’t matter. It looks as though the outcome of the game has been decided. Now it’s all about the point spread.

Between now and the upcoming presidential election there will be a lot of finger pointing. Most of it will be well earned. There’s plenty of blame to go around and a great many worthy targets. If the goal is to pick out the most deserving recipient of blame, we would vote for the man who sits in the oval office. Looking back from our very narrow perspective, it seems that our most errant forecasts concerning the war were usually a consequence of badly underestimating President Bush’s passion for creating a democratic Iraq and overestimating his inclination to fight to achieve this goal.

Early on, we thought that the president would be happy to settle for what we called “our despot instead of theirs.” In August 2003, we said the following.

I have never thought that this war had anything to do with a Wilsonian-type vision of “making the world safe for democracy,” or of being the “world’s policeman.” In fact, I have always believed that to the degree that this kind of language has been used by anyone in the Bush crowd, it was used to soften

the sharp edges of an aggressive, practical strategy of retribution and threat management that was, at its heart, the antithesis of altruism.

Over time, we began to understand that we were wrong about this, that the President was much more serious about the democracy thing than we had thought. But we still held out hope that he would not make it the centerpiece of the war but would concentrate instead on killing the enemy. In November 2003, we put it thusly.

So the task ahead for the Bush administration, as I see it, involves convincing the American people once again that the battle over Iraq is directly — very directly — linked to American security. The argument that the enemy over there killed 20 American soldiers but that that is okay because the Iraqi people now have more electricity than they had when Saddam was running the place simply won’t sell. In fact, it’s an insult. I believe it is safe to say that the vast majority of Americans don’t give a damn whether the Iraqi people have electricity, or even candles for that matter, if the cost of providing them with this luxury is the life of a single American soldier...

My advice to the Bush White House if I were asked, which I won’t be, would be to heat this conflict up. Stop talking about how good the “average” Iraqi has it now that Americans troops are there, because no one cares. Reestablish the direct link between the American military presence in Iraq and the goal of destroying a dangerous enemy.

This made sense to us, so we naturally thought that the White House agreed. We were disappointed, of course. But we still believed that President Bush was a fighter at heart, not what the British would call a “big girl’s blouse.” In October 2003, we said the following:

I don’t pretend to know what Bush may have in mind, but for starters, if I were Moqtada

Sadr, the young Shiite cleric in Karbala who has formed his own little anti-America militia, I think I'd start resting up for a go at 70 or so virgins in the near future. Sadr's actions are not only a threat to U.S. forces in Iraq but to....

It seemed so obvious to us then. We felt that President Bush would have to do something about Sadr or he would lose everything. Ergo, we predicted....Oh well....

In July 2004, we still hadn't figured Bush out. We said the following.

In fact, I simply cannot imagine that President Bush will spend his second term sitting on his hands watching as Iran and North Korea build nuclear weapons. And I cannot help but assume that if he finds that he cannot prevent these two states from becoming nuclear powers with non-military measures, then he will, to paraphrase his own words, militarily "confront the threats before they fully materialize."

Nor can I imagine that Bush will sit back and watch quietly as Iran aggressively supports the insurgency in Iraq, thus threatening what is certainly the most important foreign policy initiative of his first term and what is likely to be the historical centerpiece of his entire presidency. I think that a better bet is that he will move and move hard against Iran following his reelection.

It seemed so obvious to us then. We felt that President Bush would have to do something about Iran and Syria or he would lose everything. Ergo, we predicted....Oh well....

We could cite other instances where we were either naïve or dumb or both about what we thought were the President's primary motivations and what he would do. But the point of this exercise is not to engage in a retrospective on our past coverage. Nor is it to

point figures at culprits. As we said, there are plenty of others around who will perform that task in the months ahead.

Instead, our purpose for presenting the above quotes is to begin to lay the foundation for a theory that the finger pointers are likely to overlook. This is an unsettling and somewhat pessimistic theory, but one that we think needs to be considered by anyone who is trying to get some read on the future by studying the war in Iraq and the greater "war on terror." It goes as follows.

America's probable, upcoming defeat in Iraq (or, if you prefer, its failure to achieve victory) is not exclusively the fault of President Bush or Condi Rice or Don Rumsfeld or the generals or the "neo-cons" or the liberal anti-war protestors who give daily encouragement to the enemy. Indeed, it would be a good thing if it could be blamed solely on one of them, or on a combination of several of them. Then one could be optimistic about the future, based on the expectation that the next president will be wiser, choose smarter advisers, and do a better job of handling the home front.

But what if the real problem is that the social, economic, and political forces at work within American society today are such that no President can take the kind of military action that would be necessary to defeat an enemy like militant Islam? What if President Bush's attempt to the "take the offensive" militarily against this enemy was doomed from the start by a variety of complicated circumstances that were largely beyond his control and that will similarly thwart the next president regardless of whom that happens to be? What if the only practical military option left to the United States against an enemy like militant Islam is some half-assed combination of limited warfare and social work, which is doomed to either fail or to be far too expensive in terms of blood and treasure to be sustained over the long period of time necessary to be successful? What if the above-cited expectations that we here at the Political Forum had concerning President Bush's actions in Iraq were unrealistic from the start, not

because President Bush did not agree with us, but because the social, economic, and political forces mentioned above would allow him no other course than the one he took?

We are not simply restating here the Muslim charge that Americans are cowards, do not have the fortitude for a long war, and will cut and run when the going gets tough. Nor are we referencing the cliché about Rome falling because the Roman people became too steeped in decadence and luxury to defend themselves against the barbarians outside the gates. In fact, our theory is not based on a gloomy assessment of some weakness in the American character. It involves a combination of factors, no one of which could be considered, by itself, a weakness at all. But taken together, create practical limitations on the nation's response to threats such as the one presented by militant Islam.

At the center of this theory is the fact that the United States is an enormously complex, capitalist society. Both its economic health and the continued happiness of its citizens are entirely dependent on extensive global trade, a ready supply of foreign labor and production facilities, and easy access to a wide range of commodities, including abundant quantities of cheap oil. It is not simply that the American people have little or no tolerance for a slowdown in the great economic machine that produces the prosperity that they have learned to accept as their just due, it is also that the machine itself demands to be kept running at a permanent high rate of speed. Like a shark that will die if it quits moving forward, the American economic system must constantly expand or face the possibility of life threatening convulsions.

Moreover, American society is formed on Judeo-Christian principles. For the most part, even the agnostics and those atheists who despise and fear all religions, and Christianity in particular, subscribe to the Judeo-Christian belief that each individual life is sacred and that America must adhere to strict moral guidelines in its conduct of war, including the Augustinian principle of proportionality. Furthermore, while Americans have historically been

willing to suffer large military losses in order to defend themselves and their society against foreign threats, they are not prone to squander the lives of their young men and women on unpromising foreign adventures or on experiments in the substitution of social work for simply killing the enemy.

The result is that, as a practical matter, dropping nuclear bombs on large cities as a means of forcing an enemy to surrender unconditionally, as America did in Japan during World War II, is no longer an option. Nor is the practice of burning entire cities to the ground with conventional incendiary bombs, as America did in both Japan and Germany during World War II. Indeed, any disregard for civilian populations or any individual breaches of the "rules of war," of the kind that were common during both World Wars I and II, are to be assiduously avoided, even if they can be explained by what used to be called an "operational necessity."

Moreover, a variety of moral and practical considerations now seem to dictate that the United States must not only take extraordinary care to protect innocent civilians in the event of war, but that it must rebuild the enemy's infrastructure when the war is over, or in the case of Iraq, while the war is still going on.

All of this is partly due to self imposed humanitarian considerations that grew out of a post-World War II recognition by most of the Western allies that "total war," in which all restraints based on moral considerations, custom, or international law are disregarded, is morally repugnant because it requires the abandonment of the very principles for which Western nations are obliged to fight.

But it is also a function of globalization, which has rendered friend/enemy designations vague and has assured that virtually all nations, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, are strategically or economically important to some larger nation, which is important to other larger nations, including the United States, for myriad, interrelated economic, strategic, political, and even social considerations.

Hence, for example, the combinations and permutations of implications of launching an attack on the nuclear facilities of either Iran or North Korea are apparently so complex that they dictate the decision rather than influence it. Indeed, the United States finds itself, like Gulliver, bound by thousands of tiny threads from which it could break free if it chose, but doesn't because of numerous, conflicting considerations ranging from the fear of attack by thousands of tiny pin pricks to concern for the welfare of its adversaries.

Americans' enemies know all of this, of course, as do its quasi enemies and quasi friends, which are often impossible to tell apart. And wonder of wonders, the "great game" becomes so complicated that America's political leaders are unable to either play it properly or even to understand it, having only a limited knowledge of history, of the art of diplomacy, or of "thinking outside the box," as the expression goes.

No one can say with any degree of confidence where this is headed. In the bullring, the powerful but unskillful and stupid animal dies at the hands of a host of smaller, smarter adversaries, who work together and know the game better than the bull. But unlike the United States, the bull doesn't have an arsenal of nuclear weapons and an army large enough to wipe out the entire *plaza de toros* and everyone in and around it.

Our fear and expectation is that this is how the "grand game" with militant Islam is going to end. It may take another September 11. It may take several of them. But eventually the cost-benefit considerations of "total war" will shift and all of the self-imposed moral restraints mentioned above, as well as the many social, economic, cultural, and political considerations also mentioned above, will be cast aside in a fit of anger, at which time the United States will revert to the old rules, the ones that governed the action against Japan and Germany. After all, as Hobbes pointed out three and half centuries ago, the commerce and civility that Americans cherish cannot continue to thrive in an atmosphere of war and fear.

Then again, America might just give up, like the Europeans are doing.

IRAQ AS VIETNAM.

One of the biggest problems with the liberal Baby Boomers' "Myth of Vietnam" is their refusal even to acknowledge the consequences of American surrender in Southeast Asia. If the senescent anti-warriors can be bothered to address ramifications at all, they claim simply that there were none, since the Vietnamese "domino" fell without precipitating a global explosion of Marxism. In their narcissistic, blinkered view of that era, they heroically stopped a cruel and brutal war and, in the process, proved the American political and military establishments wrong. In their view, no tragedy followed the American withdrawal from Saigon, no collapse of the "free world," and no expansion of Soviet influence or ambition.

Of course, this myth is almost entirely untrue. The fall of Saigon did in fact start a chain reaction in the region. As for the tragic aspects of the immediate post-war period, we strongly suspect that the millions of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos would beg to differ with the liberal Boomers on this point, as would the millions of those who were slaughtered by the communist regimes – if they weren't dead, that is.

More to the point, the consequences of America's defeat in Vietnam were felt most acutely outside of Southeast Asia. Once it became clear that the American political class, egged on by the disproportionately noisy anti-war movement, was no longer able or willing to defend the nation's interests abroad, the world's "bad actors" felt themselves liberated to wreck havoc without fear of reprisal. Indeed, the very seeds of the current global crisis, the war against Islamism, took root during this period of American submission.

From the Arab Oil Embargo to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (which eventually spawned al Qaeda) to the Iranian Revolution and the armed takeover of sovereign U.S. territory (i.e. the American embassy in Tehran), the enemies of the United States were emboldened by the failure and lack of will that was demonstrated in Vietnam. After the ignominious American escape from Saigon, global bad actors acted with impunity, knowing that the abduction of several dozen American citizens would be met with a hapless

rescue attempt and little else, or that the invasion of a sovereign nation would precipitate nothing more menacing than a boycott of the Olympic games. Until President Reagan came along and changed the dynamic, the nations of the world rightly understood American sentiments to be largely immaterial.

It is worth keeping all of this in mind, we believe, as the nation's political class once again debates the finer points of military surrender. While we've heard lots of glowing, happy talk from the likes of Nancy Pelosi, John Murtha, John Kerry, and Chuck Hagel about how the world will be a wonderful, serene place with non-stop chirping songbirds once American troops are withdrawn from Iraq, we've heard precious little about the real, long-term strategic implications of American capitulation, implications that transcend the immediate and narrow interests of America's politicians.

Though none of those who would end American involvement in Iraq appear willing to discuss the matter in any detail, it is, in our opinion, clear what the long-term ramifications of such a policy would be. For starters, Iraqis who sided with America would, once again, be slaughtered, just as they were in 1991 when James Baker and company talked them into rising up against Saddam and then left them to be butchered. After a second such betrayal, we would wish good luck to any future American president who might be charged with the task of convincing the people of the Middle East to "trust us" in any matter.

More broadly, it is likely that global bad actors will feel free to do as they please without fear of ramifications, just as in the aftermath of Vietnam. With the United States demonstrating conclusively in Iraq that it still lacks the requisite strength of purpose to impose its will on the world's rogue nations, those rogue nations will undoubtedly choose to impose their own will.

In this Saturday's *Wall Street Journal*, the former world chess champion and occasional political commentator Garry Kasparov argued that Iraq is a distraction for the United States and that the ongoing effort there is contrary to America's real interests. To wit:

For the past few years, the dictators and terrorists have been gaining ground, and with good reason. The deepening catastrophe in Iraq has distracted the world's sole superpower from its true goals, and weakened the U.S. politically as well as militarily. With new congressional leadership threatening to make the same mistake – failing to see Iraq as only one piece of a greater puzzle – it is time to return to the basics of strategic planning.

Thirty years as a chess player ingrained in me the importance of never losing sight of the big picture. Paying too much attention to one area of the chessboard can quickly lead to the collapse of your entire position. America and its allies are so focused on Iraq they are ceding territory all over the map. Even the vague goals of President Bush's ambiguous war on terror have been pushed aside by the crisis in Baghdad.

With all due respect to Mr. Kasparov, he has it precisely backwards. The "dictators and terrorists" of the world haven't been gaining ground because the United States is distracted or preoccupied. Rather, they've been gaining ground because they know – not think, mind you, but *know* – that the "world's sole superpower" is helpless to do anything about, well, anything.

The Iranians continue to meddle in Iraq and to try to build nuclear weapons because they know that there is no one in the world – save perhaps tiny Israel – who will tell them that they can't. For three years now, the Mullhas have done everything short of actually testing a bomb in downtown Tel Aviv, and their president has repeatedly and unashamedly called for the destruction of Israel. And the collective response from the world's "great" powers, including the United States, has been, essentially, to ask them to cut it out or they'll do . . . well, nothing much.

The North Koreans have actually built nukes and continue to test the missiles by which to deliver

them, occasionally dropping one in the Sea of Japan. And again there is exactly no chance that anyone is going to stop them. The United Nations is a joke. The Japanese have a constitution that officially bans a military response. And the United States has essentially made farming this problem out to someone else its official policy.

But it's not just the official "axis of evil" nations that have grasped the fact that the American political class can do nothing to stop them from doing as they please. This past September, we wrote that of all the threats on the geopolitical horizon, the one that might prove most dangerous, but which is least discussed, is that posed by the newly reinvigorated and troublesome Russian autocracy. We wrote:

Russia today is run by a small oligarchy of former KGB officials, the most important of which, of course, is President Vladimir Putin, a former KGB colonel. More to the point, the KGB remnants appear not to have given up their fondness for destabilizing the world and using Islamic radicals to do so.

As [Former Romanian Lt. General Ion Mihai] Pacepa noted last month, "Israel has been attacked [by Hezbollah] with Soviet Kalashnikovs and Katyushas, Russian Fajr-1 and Fajr-3 rockets, Russian AT-5 Spandrel antitank missiles and Kornet antitank rockets. Russia's outmoded weapons are now all the rage with terrorists everywhere in the world, and the bad guys know exactly where to get them. The weapons cases abandoned by Hezbollah were marked: 'Customer: Ministry of Defense of Syria. Supplier: KBP, Tula, Russia.'" And this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

The Russians, of course, have been instrumental both in the development of the Iranian nuclear program and in precluding United Nations action in response to that program. The Russians are building Iran's Bushehr nuclear plant. Today,

Iranian atomic program chief Gholamreza Aghazadeh is in Moscow meeting with Sergei Kiriienko, the director of Russia's federal nuclear power agency. The Russians have supplied the Iranians with their most advanced anti-aircraft system and have helped them increase the accuracy and range of their Shahab-3 and Shahab-4 missile systems, both of which are Russian designed....

We don't mean to sound alarmist about the state of Russia and its current role in geopolitical affairs. But frankly, it's kind of hard not to be.

In the several weeks since those words were written, it has become clear that the situation in Russia is even worse than we then realized. Comrade Putin has launched his own global campaign of terror, murdering any rivals, potential rivals, or critics who dare to question his plans and schemes. It's not that this policy is particularly new. After all, Putin has been murdering his critics for years now. But the latest assassination, carried out last month against former Russian intelligence Colonel Alexander Litvinenko *in London*, was brazen, even by Russian standards.

Not that anyone should be shocked by Putin's brazenness. Earlier this year, the Putin regime openly and unabashedly declared war on its critics. A July 11 letter to *The Times* of London, written by the former Soviet dissident and political prisoner Vladimir Bukovsky and the onetime KGB colonel and London station chief Oleg Gordievsky, detailed Putin's war declaration thusly:

Former KGB Lieutenant-Colonel Vladimir Putin, has rushed through the state Duma two new pieces of legislation.

First, a new law enabling him to use his secret services as "death squads" to eliminate "extremists" anywhere abroad (including in this country). Second, an amendment to existing law on fighting "extremism", providing a much broader

definition of that “crime” which, among other things, will include now any “libellous” statements about his Administration.

Thus, the stage is set for any critic of Putin’s regime here, especially those campaigning against Russian genocide in Chechnya, to have an appointment with a poison-tipped umbrella. According to the statement by the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov, the black list of potential targets is already compiled.

Tellingly, Putin pushed these laws through the legislature just as he was about to welcome George Bush, Tony Blair, and the rest of the leaders of the developed world to St. Petersburg for a G8 meeting. Did any of the successors to Roosevelt, Churchill, and DeGaulle raise this blatant violation of global norms with Stalin’s heir? Are you kidding? Why would they? They could not have done anything about it anyway, and everyone involved knew it. The same goes for the murder of a British resident alien on British soil. Putin knows that there is nothing the Brits, the Americans, or anyone else can do about it. So what’s to stop him?

Like Putin, young Bashar Assad in Syria has also come to realize that there is no one capable of stopping him from exerting his political will through the assassination of his critics. Last month, Assad’s thuggish regime resumed its practice of murdering anti-Syrian officials in Lebanon, this time taking out leading Christian politician Pierre Gemayel. Less than two years ago, of course, Assad himself was the one who feared for his life, as it looked as if he and his henchmen might be brought to justice for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. But now that it is clear that there is no one capable of holding the murderous Assad accountable for his deeds, the assassinations have resumed.

And what has changed in two years to convince Assad that he can act with impunity? That’s an easy one. The Iraq war has stalled and, as a result, the American political class has lost its nerve.

In Vietnam, the surrender was ultimately bipartisan. The Democrats lead the way, but the Republican president – who, by the way, had just beaten the anti-war Democrat in the most lopsided presidential election in American history – slowly went along. And so, it appears, will be the case in Iraq. Once again, the Democrats have taken the lead in pursuing surrender, but, once again, the Republican president appears willing to follow, apparently having lost his nerve and submitted to the wishes of his father and his father’s “realist” counselors. President Bush still talks a good game, of course, but for some time now his rhetoric and his actions have been wildly at odds. If, as expected, he yields to his critics and changes course in Iraq in a manner consistent with the advice from the Democrats and the “realist” Republicans, he will send the signal to anyone who has not yet figured it out that the United States is out of the business of punishing the bad guys for their acts of murder and terror.

What this means for the future is not good. Bin Laden stated in his original declaration of war against the United States that he believes that Americans are “the weak horse” and will not be able to mount an effective defense against his *jihad*. Once the surrender in Iraq is complete, he and his ilk will have one more illustration of this point. It appeared for a brief moment that the bin Laden hypothesis would prove wrong and that Americans would aggressively and harshly avenge the attacks on their home soil. But that no longer appears likely.

In fact, it has become more likely that the pre-9/11 mindset will once again become dominant, even in the United States. This suggests the possibility of more and more vicious terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies, namely Britain and Israel. And that in turn, suggests that there will be increasing pressure on Israeli politicians to make plans to defend their nation aggressively.

It’s not all bad news, though. The good news is that the broader war on terror is not over. Moreover, we continue to believe that when it finally is, the United States will emerge victorious. The Islamists have little grasp of strategy and are almost certain to abuse

their newly gained advantage and to overplay their hand, thereby precipitating a truly ferocious American reprisal.

Of course, the bad news is that the last time the Islamists overplayed their hand, they wound up killing more than 3000 people in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. And there's no telling how many they'll kill next time.

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