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## THEY SAID IT

The administration of the great system of the universe, however, the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension; the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country: that he is occupied in contemplating the more sublime, can never be an excuse for his neglecting the more humble department; and he must not expose himself to the charge which Avidius Cassius is said to have brought, perhaps unjustly, against Marcus Antoninus; that while he employed himself in philosophical speculations, and contemplated the prosperity of the universe, he neglected that of the Roman empire. The most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759.

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

Since the beginning of time, it seems to us that the lion's share of unhappiness among mankind can be attributed to unrealistic expectations. Now, for purposes of this article, we want immediately to contrast the word "unhappiness" with misery. Misery stems from a variety of causes including, but not limited to disease, war, injustice, crime, and man's inhumanity to man. The word unhappiness, as we are using it here, is a state of mind, "Oh woe is me, Billy didn't invite me to the prom." It is a social phenomenon that can be mitigated to some degree by religiously or philosophically based understandings of the vicissitudes of life and the temporal nature of material pleasures.

It couldn't be proven, of course, but it seems logical to assume that the per capita share of the world's unhappiness stemming from unrealistic expectations has risen over the centuries in direct sympathy with what we in the West call "progress," and take to mean the general betterment of mankind via advances in learning and technology.

Early humans were too busy just staying alive to entertain large stores of expectations. And even as civilization slowly made life a little easier for virtually everyone and presented opportunities that were previously unavailable to the average person, it wasn't really until well into the Enlightenment that even a small plurality of Westerners were in a position to expect too much out of life, which was, for the most part and for most people, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. We, of course, borrowed this quaint phrase from the philosopher Thomas Hobbes who, as we understand it, became famous for using it to describe his wife.

### In this Issue

Great Expectations.

More Great Expectations.

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Today, in much more pleasant times, Westerners of all ages and social strata not only dream of prosperous and happy lives but most have come to expect it. Adam Smith was the first to note and analyze these rising expectations among common people as a result of “progress.” And, for the most part, he saw it as a good thing for society as a whole.

In support of this view he related the famous parable of the “ambitious poor man’s son” who is unhappy because of the mean condition of his life and is attracted by the opportunity to improve it by hard work. He describes this situation as follows:

The poor man’s son, whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition, when he begins to look around him, admires the condition of the rich. He finds the cottage of his father too small for his accommodation, and fancies he should be lodged more at his ease in a palace. He is displeased with being obliged to walk a-foot, or to endure the fatigue of riding on horseback. He sees his superiors carried about in machines, and imagines that in one of these he could travel with less inconveniency. He feels himself naturally indolent, and willing to serve himself with his own hands as little as possible; and judges that a numerous retinue of servants would save him from a great deal of trouble. He thinks if he had attained all these, he would sit still contentedly, and be quiet, enjoying himself in the thought of the happiness and tranquility of his situation. He is enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity....

To obtain the conveniences which these afford, he submits in the first year, nay in the first month of his application, to more fatigue of body and more uneasiness of mind than he could have suffered through the whole of his life from the want of them. He studies to distinguish himself in some laborious profession. With the most unrelenting industry, he labours night and day to acquire

talents superior to all his competitors...he serves those whom he hates, and is obsequious to those whom he despises.....

As one of the world’s leading moral philosophers, Smith recognized that this process would eventually produce a certain amount of unhappiness based on unrealistic expectations of felicity. Indeed, he provides the following description of his phenomenon at work on the ambitious poor man’s son.

It is then, in the last dregs of life, his body wasted with toil and diseases, his mind galled and ruffled by the memory of a thousand injuries and disappointments which he imagines he has met with from the injustice of his enemies, or from the perfidy and ingratitude of his friends, that he begins at last to find that wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility...

Yet, despite the inevitable unhappiness that Smith anticipated would result from these efforts, he hailed the process itself as a boon to mankind.

It is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe...

Now, as this last sentence indicates, Smith understood that he was witnessing something new in the history of mankind, a complex phenomenon resulting from a variety of discoveries and inventions, including the expansion and spread of knowledge made possible by the printing press and the birth of modern industry made possibly by the concept of the division of labor. He recognized that opportunities for advancement were opening up to people who had never dreamed of a life different from that of their meanest ancestors,

and that these opportunities were giving birth to a new kind of society that would be marked both by increasing prosperity and, ironically, a large degree of frustration resulting from the failure of this new prosperity to produce contentment, satisfaction, and happiness. He put it this way.

Power and riches appear then to be, what they are . . . though they may save him from some smaller inconveniences, can protect him from none of the severer inclemencies of the season. They keep off the summer shower, not the winter storm, but leave him always as much, and sometimes more exposed than before, to anxiety, to fear, and to sorrow; to diseases, to danger, and to death.

In Smith's world, hard work was the only practical ladder to material prosperity available to the ambitious poor man's son. Because of this, he could not have anticipated in those early days of the industrial revolution, that wealth and prosperity would some day become so vast and widespread across Europe and the New World that a new parasitic form of the ambitious poor man's son would emerge.

This fellow's unhappiness would originate not from the failure of work and subsequent material prosperity to provide true happiness, but from the failure of material prosperity to materialize in the absence of any sort of work at all. This individual would have the same ambition for comfort as Smith's ambitious poor man's son, but he would provide no benefit whatsoever to society because his ambition would not move him to actually work but instead to demand goods and services based simply on his "right" to them. Moreover, his subsequent unhappiness would not result in an epiphany of insight into the human condition, but would instead manifest itself in a din of demand for an even greater share of material wealth at the expense of society.

In other words, Smith could not have anticipated the emergence of the "nanny state," which is presently in the process of quite literally destroying the societies

of huge portions of the English speaking world, at the very time that the wealth producing potential of these societies has never been greater.

Now, we know that this is an old story, and we wouldn't even bring it up this week except that it forms a useful background for opening a discussion about a new twist to the long-running saga involving the relationship between prosperity, ambition, disappointment, and the national interest.

You see, it has come to pass in recent decades that a new creature has emerged in large numbers in the Western world, one who has become bored with the pursuit of happiness via the acquisition of material goods, whether by work or welfare. This fellow has not given up on this pursuit, he has simply found it to be too easy, not demanding enough to occupy his full time interest. Prosperity has provided him with such a surfeit of homes, automobiles, clothes, food, ready cash, cell phones, I-pods, flat screen televisions, and myriad sensual pleasures that the pursuit of more has become commonplace.

Moreover, he has discovered, as Adam Smith knew he would, that material goods do not provide the happiness and the contentment he desires. Unlike Smith's ambitious poor man's son, he finds that he is not enchanted with the idea of sitting still, contentedly and quiet, enjoying himself in the thought of the happiness and tranquility that his situation in life has provided. Also unlike Smith's ambitious poor man's son, he has learned the lesson about the failure of material goods to produce happiness not "in the last dregs of life," his body "wasted with toil and diseases," but in the early years, early enough at least to give him time to seek new avenues for happiness, ones that Smith could hardly have anticipated.

To be more specific, this creature has expanded his expectations far beyond the realm of wealth and material goods. He is displeased about grander insults to his person than those that sparked the ambition in the ambitious poor man's son. He is unhappy about circumstances that prior generations of mankind,

all the way back to Adam and his lovely wife Eve, regarded as natural and permanent elements of man's existence.

Looking around him, as did the ambitious poor man's son, he finds that the world is a decidedly unpleasant place for a person of his sensitivity. He discovers that it is filled with threats to his happiness, to his sense of tranquility. He discovers that he is exposed to anxiety, to fear, and to sorrow; to diseases, to danger, and to death. Everywhere he looks, he sees poverty, war, injustice, crime, and myriad examples of man's inhumanity to man, all of which fill him with unhappiness.

He finds that he is against fossil fuels. He worries a great deal that the Polar Bears are in danger of drowning. He is also against war, disease and poverty. He is in favor of taking more from "the rich" and giving it to "the poor." The threat of terrorism discomfms him, and he wants his country and all of its allies to stop doing whatever it is that angers these people. Among other things, war is an affront to his piece of mind. He feels that he cannot be happy in a world such as this. He decides to do something about it. This gives him a sense of purpose, a feeling of nobility, and a greatly expanded image of his own self-worth. He feels superior to those whose intentions are not as noble as his.

He is not stupid, but the many distractions of modern society, particularly those that have provided him with entertainment since he was a child, have kept him from acquiring a serious understanding of such things as economics, history, sociology, politics, and literature. He is a repository of a great deal of information but has never developed those skills related to critical thinking that would be necessary to translate any of this information into wisdom.

He goes on the Internet and finds that there are millions of souls in the Western world who share his concerns, his noble intentions, his belief that something can be done to make the world more to his liking, to eliminate those pesky things that trouble him, things such as war, poverty, climate changes, disease, crime, and inequality. He finds folks who share his

expectations that the process of performing these feats will bring happiness and purpose to life. Like the ambitious poor man's son, he is enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity.

But unlike the ambitious poor man's son, the collective efforts of him and his sort will, over time, actually impede the general welfare of society rather than rouse and keep in continual motion the industry of mankind, for their actions are neither informed by wisdom nor realistic within the context of the world as it is. Their efforts will, however, illustrate an ancient truth, as did the efforts of the ambitious poor man's son. It won't be the same truth, the one involving the failure of material wealth to produce happiness, but another, namely that idle hands are the devil's playground.

Chances are that this creature will disappear when trouble visits and men are once again called upon to concentrate on the practical problems of staying alive in a dangerous world rather than on the leisurely task of creating a utopia. If he doesn't disappear, however, if his breed is in the ascendancy, then the best that can be said is that his grandchildren will likely have a chance to be the ambitious sons and daughters of poor men, like those who caught the attention of Adam Smith 250 years ago.

## **MORE GREAT EXPECTATIONS.**

If nothing else, George W. Bush makes a fine whipping boy. Got a problem? George Bush is to blame. He *must* be to blame. Who else could be? Everywhere and at all times, George Bush is making a hash of things. It has to be true. *Everyone* says so.

On no issue is this truer than the war on terror and the Middle East. Everything bad that happens in the Middle East, from Iraq to Egypt to Israel and back again, is Bush's fault and more specifically the result of some glaringly obvious mistake he's made in executing the war on terror. It doesn't matter that the people of the Middle East have been killing each other pretty much non-stop since they began walking upright. That's beside the point. It's like the Bible says, "George W. Bush is the root of all evil."

Even Bush's purported allies think that everything he does is dangerous, deadly, and, above all, boneheaded. Just the last week, for example, John McCain, who is the President's staunchest Congressional ally on Iraq and his unofficially designated successor, reiterated to supporters at a campaign event that he, like they, is "angry because of the mishandling of the war." The good Senator supports the war, he just wishes Bush hadn't screwed it up.

And he's hardly alone. Both of the other top contenders to succeed Bush as the GOP's presidential nominee, Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney, told the annual gathering of conservatism's glitterati at CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference) that they too think that Bush has bungled Iraq.

In a sense, this is precisely as it should be. After all, Bush is the President. And the President gets credit in the good times and blame in the bad. Bush led us to war. And he takes the fall if things don't go well. That's the way things work. Neither George Bush nor anyone else should expect anything different. Calling this "George Bush's war" may be incredibly shortsighted and petty as a matter of public policy, but as a matter of historical fact, it is largely indisputable.

It is also beside the point and incredibly foolish. The effort to blame everything that goes wrong on George Bush and to turn every twist and turn in this deadly and complicated struggle into Bush's "mistake" is a dangerous game that is based on historical ignorance and specious self-aggrandizement, is aggravated by political ambition, and is all but certain to warp Americans' expectations for the progress of the war, thereby increasing the likelihood of defeat.

It goes without saying that there have been mistakes made in the execution of the war on terror and on that war's chief battlefield, Iraq. In retrospect, many of the decisions made by President Bush and his advisors have been flawed, and many of the policies they've implemented have been disastrous. But that's the rule rather than the exception in the conduct of war. There is a reason that the old adage that "no

battle survives contact with the enemy" is an old adage – *because it's true*. After all, as Sun Tzu noted, war is an art, not an exact science.

All of the major wars in American history have been plagued by mistakes of monumental proportion. Washington was routed early in the War of Independence. The War of 1812 was a disaster that saw the White House itself burned. Lincoln's efforts during the Civil War were criticized and ridiculed more ruthlessly at that time than Bush's efforts are today. So egregious were Lincoln's "mistakes" that the commander of his Union Army, General George McClellan, actually challenged the President openly, running against him as the Democratic presidential nominee in the election of 1864. As classicist and military historian Victor Davis Hanson noted last week:

Optional conflicts like the Mexican War, the Philippines Insurrection, Korea and Vietnam all cost more lives than Iraq. Even our most successful wars witnessed far more lethal stupidity than anything seen in Baghdad. Thousands of American dead resulted from lapses like the Confederate surprise at Shiloh, Japanese surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, and the German surprise attacks in the Ardennes.

It would be absurd to try to argue that Bush hasn't royally screwed up portions of this war, but it is every bit as absurd to suggest he and he alone is the cause of our current woes. Had he not been president, leading the war effort, making mistakes, then it is almost certain that someone else would have been leading the war effort, making mistakes.

When John McCain, to name just one critic, tells us that Bush has made mistakes in the conduct of the war, he does so not because he wants the historical record to reflect events accurately, but because he wants us to believe that he would have done things not just differently but better. He may be right. But

chances are that he's wrong. At the very least, there is no way for him to know that. And there was certainly no way for him – or anyone else for that matter – to have known that before the purported mistakes were made. The presumption that he or anyone else would have outperformed President Bush under the same conditions is based in part on biography but derives principally from arrogance and faulty logic.

These are the same defects that plague the anti-war left, applied to the discussion of the war at a different point in the conversation, but equally dangerous. The left (and the anti-war paleo-right) wants us to believe that war, in and of itself, is a mistake, that Bush's biggest blunder was in going to war at all, thereby causing or exacerbating all of the problems we now associate with Iraq, Afghanistan, and the broader Middle East. Bush's conservative critics merely push the timeline of the "big mistake," contending that the idea of the war or of war in general is acceptable, but that the execution of it was so flawed that it caused or exacerbated all of the problems we now associate with Iraq, Afghanistan, and the broader Middle East.

Both arguments suffer from a multicollinearity problem. Both presume that the problems evident in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East are the result of Bush's mistakes, whatever they may be. This supposition is hardly supported by the evidence and is, in fact, logically flawed (*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*). Moreover, it leads inevitably to the conclusion that war or the conduct of foreign policy (in the absence of war) is something that should be easy, that a "competent" president would be able to accomplish without the types of setbacks that Bush's efforts in these areas have suffered. This supposition is not merely dubious, but dangerous, affecting expectations and leading inevitably to the conclusion that anything that is complicated, that is messy, that costs American lives or treasure, is not worth doing. Only that which is easy, which is quick, painless, and bloodless is worthwhile, and anything else is unquestionably a "mistake."

Unfortunately, as the debate over the conduct of the war relates to expectations, the full-throated critiques

of Bush rest not only on a lack of humility and lack of cognitive consistency but on a lack of responsibility as well.

It is easy for critics to argue about what President Bush should do or what they believe he needs to do to make things work better in the war. We do it all the time ourselves. Some such critiques, such as the suggestion made last fall that a surge of troops into Baghdad was necessary to stabilize the capital and suppress rampant sectarian violence, are both reasonable and strategically sound. But others – most of the others, in fact – are based on limited information and are feasible only in a hypothetical sense, where consequences can be ignored.

It is commonplace, for example, to argue that President Bush should get tough on Iran, that he should take out the Islamic Republic's nuclear weapons program, and that he should admit that America is, in fact, at war with Iran and has been for nearly three decades. That's all well and good. And certainly we'd agree that action against Iran seems more than justified. Indeed, we've argue that point in these pages. But, of course, President Bush – and President Bush alone – has to worry about the consequences that such an escalation might bring.

Republicans like to point out that for all of his foreign policy travails, President Bush's handling of the domestic scene, the economy in particular, has been remarkably successful. And they're right. The fact of the matter is that we are now in the 63rd month of the current economic expansion, which, as our friend Ed Yardeni pointed out last week, is already six months longer than the average post-World-War-II expansion.

Moreover, this expansion began in the rubble of the Tech Wreck and the most devastating and aggressive act of war against the American homeland perhaps in the history of the country, an attack that, by the way, targeted the heart of the nation's financial center. Equally remarkably, the expansion has thus far withstood the popping of the housing bubble and has actually produced falling federal budget deficits.

One wonders if these same Republicans would be as enthusiastic about Bush's economic record if he did something to alter the course of this expansion; if, for example, he heeded the advice of his critics, attacked Iran, and provoked a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, thereby pushing the price of oil up over \$90 or \$100 per barrel and inducing a global recession. Our guess is that they wouldn't. Indeed, we'd guess they'd be apoplectic. Given the fecklessness of many current Republican legislators, we wouldn't be surprised in such an event to see them leading the charge to impeach the President, not for any "high crime" or "misdemeanor," but for imperiling their re-election chances by stifling economic growth.

Of course, none of the critics has to worry about such things. That's the President's job.

On a more contemporary and potentially more immediately pressing matter, it looks as if the Taliban is resurgent in Afghanistan, not because Afghanistan itself is particularly hospitable to their Islamist machinations, but because certain regions of neighboring Pakistan are. Last week, *Der Spiegel's* Matthias Gerbauer reported from Peshawar, Pakistan that "bloodthirsty propaganda is everywhere in northern Pakistan near the border with Afghanistan" and that "Western intelligence agencies believe that the Taliban have used the winter to thoroughly tighten their organizational structure" under the guidance of "Mullah Dadullah," in preparation for a massive "spring offensive" that Dadullah has predicted will be a "bloodbath for the occupiers."

Based on this alone, one would think it obvious that President Bush should order a more aggressive pursuit of the Taliban and its leaders, even into Pakistan, if that's where they are harbored. Afghanistan was the war we had won. To allow it slip back into chaos is unacceptable. The Taliban's resurgence must be stopped, regardless of what that entails.

And note that the necessity of a renewed vigor in the war against the Taliban is obvious even in the absence of last week's attempted assassination of Vice

President Cheney, which should simply serve to make this necessity undeniable, even to the administration's harshest and most frivolous critics. After all, the attempted assassination of the Vice President of the United States is unquestionably an act of war. And if that act was planned and coordinated from Pakistan and with the tacit if not overt approval of some elements of the Pakistani intelligence services – as it almost certainly was – then it would seem that President Bush should have no choice but to take the fight to Pakistan.

So why isn't he?

Unfortunately, things aren't quite that easy. For starters, Pakistan is a sovereign country and an ally, at least on paper. And as David Rivkin and Lee Casey pointed out last week, "international law has long provided that, even in wartime, a nation cannot pursue its enemies into the territory of friendly countries without their express permission." More to the point, Pakistan is a basket case. Its president, Pervez Musharraf, is always in danger of being overthrown, either by unhappy elements within the military who resent having to deal with America's problem in northern Pakistan or by Islamist radicals, who boast considerable public support. If Bush were to escalate the war against the Taliban in Pakistan, whether with or without Musharraf's blessing, he would run the very serious and real risk of making an enemy out of an at least nominal ally, thereby expanding the conflict in central Asia exponentially and risking regional war.

But that's not the worst of it. Most of the world, even most of the leftist elements both in the United States and in Europe, is in agreement that the Islamist radicals in Iran should not be allowed to gain nuclear weapons. But if Musharraf falls in Pakistan, Iran becomes a side show, since Pakistan already possesses the world's first "Islamic Bomb." Not only would the United States have a new enemy in the war on terror, but it would have a new enemy that has spent much of the last century warring with its neighbor (India) and that will have nuclear weapons to use, to sell, or with which to bargain.

Does that mean that President Bush is right to let Musharraf and the Pakistanis off the hook? Not necessarily. But it does mean that the issues involved are incredibly complicated. And that's the point of all of this. Critics can complain all they want about what Bush is and is not doing. But this is an incredibly complicated business. And we haven't even touched on the moral, ethical, and political constraints under which the President operates that serve only to complicate things even more.

As we note in the above piece, Western man's expectations are already hopeless warped. The constant criticism of President Bush, the unremitting pretense that *he* is the reason that this war is so complicated and so screwed up, is all but certain to warp these expectations even more.

Certainly, those who disagree with George Bush about the conduct of foreign policy and the execution of the war have a right and, indeed, an obligation to speak up when they feel that the President's actions are detrimental to the nation. But they have a second obligation as well, one that is never discussed and which most critics don't appear to know they have. But whether they know it or not, they have an obligation to ensure that their criticism is not so shallow and so unremitting as to give the American public the misimpression that this war should be easy and that mistakes can be remedied by a few simple changes in policy or, at worst, a change in leadership.

Ultimately this has very little to do with President Bush and everything to do with the public's ability to understand the complexities of this struggle and thus

to its dedication to see it through to its conclusion. If anything, this is likely to be more relevant for the president who is sworn in 22 months from now than it is for Bush.

What, for instance, will President McCain tell the American people when his policies, implemented in accordance with their will, fail magically to uncomplicate this complicated mess? Our guess is that whatever he tells them won't work and that the perversion of their expectations and their disillusionment with the "war on terror" will simply accelerate. Much like Nixon's "secret plan" to extricate the United States from Vietnam, the promises of "fewer mistakes" will prove illusory and the compulsion to surrender will only intensify.

President Bush's critics – a group that includes just about everyone in politics these days – would do well to keep all of this in mind. Whipping the President may produce short-term political gains, but it is highly unlikely to do anything at all to address the problems the nation faces. This war is anything but easy. It is messy, deadly, and hopelessly complex. And to pretend otherwise does a monumental disservice the nation. More important, it is likely to raise expectations among the American public that cannot be met by any president, which could in turn lead to "mistakes" in the future that will make those made in the past look insignificant by comparison.

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