

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

In this Issue

Thy Name Is Incompetence.

THEY SAID IT

Duke: I know thee well. How dost thou, my good fellow?

Clown: Truly, sir, the better for my foes and the worse for my friends.

Duke: Just the contrary; the better for thy friends.

Clown: No, sir, the worse.

Duke: How can that be?

Clown: Marry, sir, they praise me and make an ass of me; now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass: so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself and by my friends I am abused.

--William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*.

THY NAME IS INCOMPETENCE.

It is now nearly universally accepted that both political parties in this nation are run by individuals of marginal political acumen at best. The Republicans, led by George Bush have done everything within their power to make steadiness look like incompetence, to create scandal where none exists, and generally to alienate nearly every voter or potential voter in the country, covering the entire ideological gamut. It's no wonder that the good folks at *National Review* felt compelled to paraphrase Casey Stengel on the cover of last week's issue and thus to ask about this administration "can't anyone here play this game?"

Not that the Democrats are much better. Indeed, they may even be worse. For years, we argued that the best thing Republicans had going for them was that their rivals were the Democrats. And while that changed last fall, when the GOP completely collapsed, it appears more and more that the old status quo may be reasserting itself. Even in the wildest dreams of the most fevered anti-Democratic minds, the speed with which the Pelosi-Reid Democrats have squandered their political momentum could hardly have been imagined last fall, or even as recently as this January. Somehow in a matter of only a few weeks, without doing much of anything, the Democrats have nonetheless managed both to upset their base and to estrange themselves from the political mainstream, which is no mean feat.

The proximate causes for the recent flare-ups of political incompetence among the respective players are fairly easy to identify. In the case of the Democrats, they sold their collective soul during the election last November to the anti-warriors, who, not surprisingly, have come to collect on the agreement. During last year's campaign, the public voices of the party spoke in dulcet tones, courting centrist voters and trying to

convince the electorate of the party's relative sanity. But behind the scenes, the rabidly anti-American "nut-roots" were positioning themselves to be the real Democratic power brokers. Despite the fact that both the anti-warriors and their ideas are considered repulsive by most average Americans, the Democrats have found themselves in a position that mandates acquiescence to their demands, lest they risk incurring the anti-warrior's wrath themselves.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi has, of course, tried to put a respectable public face on her party's capitulation to the hard left. But that has served only to highlight her managerial ineptitude and to make her unpopular among all the factions on the left. As Jonah Goldberg noted last week, when it comes to betraying and alienating the base, "it looks as if the Democrats are the Republicans on fast-forward." Moreover, it is hardly coincidence that the approval ratings for the Pelosi-Reid Congress continue to decline steadily and are nearing the level of loathing directed at the GOP Congress just prior to last November's landslide.

As for President Bush, his immediate problem is his politically incompetent and unnecessarily shifty Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales, who, through his own idiocy, has managed to turn a routine and justifiable exercise of presidential prerogative into one of the most widely discussed and potentially damaging political "scandals" of the Bush administration. Gonzales, like most of the rest of President Bush's Texas posse, was not necessarily the most qualified person for the job he was given. While he may or may not be fit to handle the work required of the Attorney General, he most definitely is not capable of handling the politics. Gonzales has wasted the President's time, encouraged the more radical fringes of the Democratic Party to pursue the administration with increased vigor, and may well prompt a constitutional showdown, all because he was unable or unwilling simply to tell the truth about the eight U.S. Attorneys whom he had fired at the White House's behest.

Gonzales, of course, is hardly the first Texas transplant to give President Bush heartburn, nor is his stint at the Department of Justice the first time he has proven less

than stellar in the performance of his duties. Between Gonzales's weak and politically tone deaf memos on interrogations of terrorist suspects, which by virtue of the then-White-House Counsel's ineptitude became a scandal in themselves, and the President's abortive and anger-inducing nomination of Harriet Miers to the United States Supreme Court, the Bush administration has been ill-served by the President's attachment to his dearest Texas intimates.

In any case, both the Republicans and the Democrats are currently jockeying for position at the bottom of the political totem pole. This has not gone unnoticed by the political media. For example, the editorial page editor for the *Washington Times*, Tony Blankley, noted last week that "For anyone with a taste for often malicious and usually incompetent war politics, the last four years have been a banquet – with the table now, in its fifth year, even more heavily laden." And Blankley is hardly alone.

The problem with most of the analysis about this breakdown in political competence, from the media and from the pertinent political players, is that it focuses on politics and politics alone. On the one hand, this is understandable. Everyone wants to know how this rash of stupidity will affect the elections and the balance of power between the parties. We do a great deal of this political interpretation ourselves.

At the same time, it strikes us that the focus on the political ramifications of managerial incompetence ignores the larger reality, namely that this incompetence does not take place in a political vacuum and the most serious repercussions involve issues greater and more consequential than who will be the next president or speaker of the House.

In a sense, we get some of this in the discussions of the impact that the Democrats' anti-war, anti-Bush positions are having or may have on both American troops abroad and the enemy. When the Democrats complain about the war, threaten to cut off its funding (even "stealthily"), or vote to force the withdrawal of troops from Iraq by September 2008, there is no question that this affects the disposition of those

doing the fighting, on both sides. But this is largely superficial and addresses the impact of Democrats' beliefs more than their political incompetence.

Besides, for our money, the most significant effects are those fostered by President Bush's political inadequacies. He is, after all, the "leader of the free world," and what he does has either a direct or an indirect effect on almost everyone on the planet. As such, his problems and mistakes ripple around the globe.

As you may have guessed, we think that many of President Bush's problems are related to the friends he brought with him to Washington. Nearly a century ago, Warren G. Harding famously complained that "I have no trouble with my enemies. I can take care of my enemies in a fight. But my friends, my goddamned friends, they're the ones who keep me walking the floor at nights!"

The difference, of course, is that Harding's friends were crooks, while Bush's are, for the most part, simply inept. Harriet Miers may have been a great personal lawyer and a trusted confidant, but she was not a suitable White House counsel, much less Supreme Court Justice. As for Gonzales, it is possible that he is even less suitable than Ms. Meiers. Old Washington hand Robert Novak described Gonzales yesterday morning as "the least popular Cabinet member on Capitol Hill, even more disliked than Rumsfeld had been." According to Novak, "The word most often used by Republicans in describing the management of the Justice Department under Gonzales is 'incompetent.'" And does anyone remember the stellar performance turned in by friend-of-a-friend Michael Brown, head of the Federal Emergency Management Administration, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina?

Every administration has its share of incompetents, of course, and very often the worst offenders are the friends who tag along (think Webb Hubbell). But the issue is exacerbated in the case of President Bush because he is so aggressively and fiercely loyal to his friends. Bush appears to believe deeply that character can trump capability and he thus elevates

to trusted positions those whose character he values. As *National Review's* Rich Lowry put it last week, the Bush administration elevates loyalists to "jobs for which they might not be suited," and "once inside the charmed Bush circle," those loyalists "tend to stay there, and rise to the level of their incompetence."

One of the consequences of this misdirected loyalty, Lowry notes, is that "it can put Bush in the position of embracing failure," as he did when he infamously told Michael Brown "your doing a great job, Brownie" just as all hell was breaking loose in New Orleans. More to the point, we think, it can put the President in the position of defending failure.

For years now, advocates and analysts have been suggesting to President Bush that if he wants to keep his favorite initiatives alive, most notably the war on terror and its most important battlefield in Iraq, then he has to defend them vigorously. Yet he rarely if ever does so. The Democrats attack him as a war-mongering dolt bent on destroying the nation and enslaving the world and Bush invariably responds by calmly acknowledging that differences of opinion are normal, that all opinions are valid, and that he understands why they might be upset and feel the way they do.

But woe be unto he who would have the temerity to question the competence, honesty, or all-around wonderfulness of any one of the President's pals. At that point, the gloves are taken off. Last week President Bush gave a short press conference in which he finally defended his administration and its decisions, aggressively and even angrily challenging his critics. In theory, it was the type of performance for which supporters have long been hoping. The only problem was that he wasn't defending the war or anything of real consequence. It was his buddy Alberto, about whom nobody gives a tinker's damn.

We're not suggesting that the President shouldn't side with his friends. We admire loyalty as much as the next guy. But for the President to do so in this context is troubling. For starters, Gonzales is in the wrong. This is a mess he largely created himself. But more importantly, this spirited defense of his friend requires

the President to spend time, energy, and political capital that would almost certainly be more effectively spent on other issues, most particularly the war in Iraq.

In addition to embracing and defending failure, Bush's unflinching personal loyalty often puts him in the position of denying failure as well. This, arguably, was the President's biggest problem regarding Iraq. Most folks blame Donald Rumsfeld for the failures of the administration's policy in Iraq, and there's no question that Defense under Rumsfeld's direction seemed unprepared for the type and ferocity of the terrorist insurgency. But Secretary Rumsfeld was not solely responsible. Certainly, the President supported the status quo and believed that the policy was working. And he did so because someone he trusted and to whom he was loyal told him that it was.

It's a little strange, we think, that for all the complaining about how the dastardly "neocons" dreamed up this war and then sold Bush and Cheney on it, none of the neocons in the administration were in Bush's inner circle; none enjoyed the President's famous loyalty; and none is any longer connected with team Bush. Three years ago, Paul Wolfowitz was the omni-purpose bogey-man of left, the wicked neocon responsible for all evil in the world. Has anyone seen or heard from Dr. Wolfowitz lately? Neither have we. (For the record, he's still running the World Bank.)

Yet the war on terror continues, though with some disturbing and decidedly non-neocon touches. *Jerusalem Post* columnist Caroline Glick discussed the ideological shift in the war on terror last week, writing:

Four years on, US forces continue their heroic fight to bring order and security to that violent land. But the purpose of their efforts is no longer clear. The US no longer pushes the Iraqis or the greater Arab world to abandon jihad in favor of freedom.

Earlier this month, columnist Joel Mowbray gave evidence of the Bush administration's abandonment of the war of ideas in a *Wall Street Journal* expose on the US taxpayer-financed Arabic-language television network

Al-Hurra. The US launched Al-Hurra in February 2004 to compete with jihadist television networks like Al-Jazeera. Its stated aim was to present a liberal, pro-democracy and pro-human rights voice to the Arab world. Yet, as Mowbray reported, since former CNN producer Larry Register was appointed to lead the network last November, that aim fell by the wayside.

In December the network began allowing itself to be used as a platform by arch terrorists like Hizbullah commander Hassan Nasrallah and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. Last month, when the Israeli Islamic movement began attacking Israel for conducting an archeological dig by the Aksa mosque, Al-Hurra's coverage of the story was more extreme than Al-Jazeera's. Palestinian Authority mufti Ikremah Sabri was brought on live and accused Israel of shooting and throwing bombs into the mosque and of denying medical care to those it had supposedly wounded. Al-Hurra has also hosted an al-Qaida terrorist who rejoiced in the September 11 attacks on America.

Also last week, we learned that new Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argued vigorously that the administration should give in to its critics shut down the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Meanwhile, Ms. Rice this week is in the Middle East, again pressuring the Israelis to find common ground with the Palestinians, who, of course, are currently "governed" (if that's the proper word) by the terrorist organizations Fatah and Hamas.

Given all of this, we can't help but wonder if Ms. Glick is right and if the Bush team has grown weary of the ideological struggle. If so, this is potentially catastrophic.

Certainly a toning down of the administration's flowery and grand rhetoric is sensible. As you know, we've had some problems with the overemphasis on radically "transforming" the world for some time.

But at this point, if Bush et al. drop the ideological component of the struggle altogether, what will they/we have left? What then would justify the “twilight struggle” against Islamism?

The war to liberate the Middle East may not be easy and it may not be particularly well received in some quarters, but it is nobly founded and certainly can't be any more dangerous than the cynical “realism” that preceded it. Moreover, the people of the Middle East can hardly be expected to embrace the American cause if its justifications are lithe and its appeals to ordinary people illusory.

Of course, while the neocons are gone from the Bush administration, the realists remain; the folks who were trained under the likes of Brent Scowcroft and James Baker, the folks who trace their history with the Bushes back to George H.W. They remain, and more to the point, they remain within the inner circle.

Look closely at the current members of the Bush administration with whom the President has a deep and abiding personal relationship and to whom he is therefore most likely to be fiercely loyal. They are, in fact, people who would be inclined to suggest to

him a different course in the Middle East, a more “realistic” course, one focusing more on “dialogue” and diplomacy and less on the transforming power of freedom and liberty. Not surprisingly, they might also argue that the closing of the prison at Guantanamo might be a reasonable ante to get back into the diplomatic game.

We can't say for sure where the President is getting his advice. But it does appear that some of it is of questionable value, reminiscent of the advice given to presidents for decades before 9/11, advice that, obviously, failed to prevent 9/11. It also appears to us – outsiders admittedly – that the President would be inclined listen to that advice and not to recognize its sorry history if it came from a beloved insider. Finally, it appears that the consequences of this advice would be potentially quite damaging to long-term efforts to rid the Middle East of its dangerous and fanatical ideologies.

This is the larger consequence of the President's personal loyalty to incompetents. And it is also the consequence of rampant political and strategic ineptitude.

Copyright 2007. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved.

Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.