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THEY SAID IT

From top to bottom we are obsessed with the political--as discussion, as action, as policy, or as solution. There is nothing in the present situation that is not assigned a dominant political value or given a distinct political identity. The economic problem, the philosophical problem, the religious problem are absorbed by the political problems. We avoid diverting our attention from the exclusively political....This is what we have come to, so sadly and swiftly, in these last years of the twentieth century; that we have made the political element the exclusive nexus of cause and effect; that political agendas now shape the new morality and the new saviors; that the exclusiveness of the political overrules all other considerations and principles of action and understanding; that the final arbiters of opinion are the political exclusivists who have no special affection for or loyalty to first principles or for wisdom and prudence; who, in short, furiously worship at the altar of special ideologies.

George A. Panichas, Editor of *Modern Age*, in an editorial in the Fall, 1995 issue, entitled "Oklahoma City: Beyond a Certain Point."

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE.

Much has been said and written about Al Gore's recent testimony before a Congressional committee concerning the "planetary emergency" of "global climate change," which he described as the "greatest crisis we've ever faced." What no one seems to have noted, as least among those comments that we have heard and read, is that it is extremely unlikely that any of the members of Congress who expressed the most concern about Mr. Gore's dire predictions will be alive when the worst elements of this great apocalypse occur, i.e., Orlando's Disney World becomes ocean front property and tourist trips to the top of the Washington Monument begin with a boat ride.

Of course, if this issue were raised, the reaction by these esteemed members of Congress would surely center on protestations of their "deep concern" for the well being of "future generations" of Americans. And indeed, this would be a noble response, involving as it does several inherently conservative concepts, including personal sacrifice voluntarily endured for the benefit of one's progeny, and deferred gratification, which is the essence of both capitalism and prudent behavior.

But, if this does indeed explain their intense interest in the subject, then how does one account for their collective indifference to the fact that they are bequeathing to their beloved legacies a festering canker of trillions upon trillions of dollars of government debt; an obscenely bloated federal bureaucracy that produces

nothing and consumes huge and continuously growing portions of the nation's output; a Social Security and Medicare system that is headed for bankruptcy; an immigration system that is corrupt, degrading to citizens and immigrants alike, and unsuited to the long-term needs of the nation; a failed public education system; and if Democrats have their way, a Middle East that is bristling with nuclear weapons and controlled by avowed enemies of the United States.

One explanation is that Congress is populated with liars and frauds who feign concern for the welfare of future generations solely as an excuse to bloviate on the political *subject de jour*, but have neither the intelligence nor the political courage to act. Another explanation involves "gridlock," that mysterious condition that incompetent and pusillanimous legislators routinely use to justify inaction, like a child who stays who stays home from school with a "stomach ache."

Of course, there is some truth in both of these constructs. But there is another, much more troubling explanation for Congressional indifference to the long-term health of the nation. This one involves the theory that Congress is merely reflecting the antipathy with which a majority of Americans today view any governmental initiative that inconveniences them economically or socially, and most especially if its alleged benefits are not likely to materialize until well into the future.

This explanation, which holds that the fault lies not in Congress but in ourselves, rests on the belief that Americans have collectively become so steeped in selfish materialism that they have lost interest in the long-term future of the nation, that American society itself has arrived at, or is fast approaching that point that Rome reached in the late days of the fourth century A.D. when, as Gibbon described it, wealth and luxury discouraged the city's subjects from "engaging in those useful and laborious undertakings which require an immediate expense, and promise a slow and distant advantage."

Now we are aware that a discussion of this sort starts us down a dark and unlovely road, one that ultimately leads to the nihilistic belief that nothing matters since the future is predetermined. But we promise to exit the road before it reaches this point, to travel but a short way down it for the purpose not of arriving at the end of American history, so to speak, but as a means of viewing and studying some aspects of the political landscape that become a little clearer when viewed from the vistas it provides.

We will begin with the observation that many wise men down through the ages have noted the existence of this deterministic road. King Solomon hinted at it in Ecclesiastes 3:1. Polybius discussed it, as did Juvenal. But most historians give Vico the credit for being the first person to attempt to actually map the course that nations follow from their founding to their ruin. In his short but famous book, *The New Science*, published in 1725, Vico suggested that nations proceed through three stages. He labeled the first and most primitive stage "the age of gods." He called the second stage "the age of heroes," and the final one "the age of men." We'll forgo the temptation to quote from Vico's original prose and instead offer the following paragraph from a lengthy introduction to *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, translated by Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin. It describes a nation in the final, third stage of its evolutionary cycle.

The discipline, respect for law, and social solidarity of the patrician order gave way to a humane and easy tolerance. Philosophy took the place of religion. Equality led to license. There was dispersion of private interests and decline of public spirit. Birth was first displaced by wealth as the sign of fitness to rule, since to acquire or retain it implied industry, thrift, and foresight. But in time, even the property qualification was swept away, and political power was extended to those who lacked the leisure or the will to exercise it wisely. The meanest citizen could press the public force into the service

of his appetites and whims, or sell his vote to the highest bidder among faction leaders and demagogues. The external symptoms of the process of disintegration were abated by the rise of bureaucratic monarchies, for the most part even more 'humane' than the democracies, yet relieving nobles and plebeians alike of public responsibility. In this last phase of the 'age of men', the humanization and softening of customs and laws continued, until breakdown within or conquest from without brought on a reversion of barbarism, and a new cycle of the three ages began.

This progression has been described, discussed, and mulled over by many Vichian enthusiasts over the years, ranging from Tocqueville to Marx to Croce to Joyce. The famous Rugby schoolmaster and historian Thomas Arnold did as well as anyone in describing the process when he noted that "states, like individuals, go through certain changes in a certain order, and are subject at different stages of their course to certain peculiar disorders."

But no one has ever succeeded in explaining, analyzing, or refining the cyclical nature of societies in a manner that provides seers with a practical tool for forecasting the future of a given country. The big problem, of course, is that it is impossible to know at which point in the downward sloping curve any given nation is at any given time. There were many periods during the first three centuries of the five century long history of the Roman Empire when citizens could have been forgiven for thinking that the final days were fast approaching, just as there were times during the last century of its existence when one could have also been forgiven for thinking that a turnaround in fortunes was underway.

Our guess is that the United States is nowhere near the late stages of its existence. After all, it is, at this point in time, the most powerful nation that the world has ever known, culturally, economically, and militarily. In fact, it is quite possible, as President Reagan once claimed, that it has not yet reached the zenith of its greatness. So, with that said, we will not venture any

further down Vico Road, which Joyce described as going "round and round to meet where terms begin" and which we ourselves noted is dark and unlovely. Instead, we will move on to the stated purpose of this piece, which is to offer "some thoughts on the presidential race," but all the while keeping in mind some Vichian notions.

The first of these is that, contrary to Al Gore's protestations, global warming is not the "greatest crisis" that this nation faces. That honor goes to the steady, inexorable cultural decay that all societies seemingly suffer if they survive long enough to become prosperous. The second is that nations rise and fall in response to forces that are far more powerful than politics alone.

This latter point is sometimes difficult to remember in the politically charged atmosphere of modern day America, where a combination of factors have turned politics into a national pastime, on par with professional sports and celebrity worship. These factors include, but are not limited to the demands of a 24-hour news cycle, the steadily growing importance and influence of the federal government to all aspects of the daily lives of its citizens, and the emergence and demands of what might be called the political-industrial complex, which has become a multi-billion dollar industry that employs tens of thousands of people nationwide and spends millions of dollars annually on media events, advertising, polling, lobbying, travel, entertainment, fund-raising activities, legal and other professional fees, and what used to be called, in polite circles, political vigorish.

And it will become even more difficult in the days ahead to keep the importance of politics in perspective as the presidential race heats up and many smart people from both sides of the political aisle begin to wax on the enormous historical importance of the election. Some will claim that this contest will "decide the future of America," while others, particularly Republicans, will maintain that the traditional American culture that conservatives know and love is in danger of being destroyed and can only be rescued by a GOP victory in November 2008.

We will, of course, join this chorus at times, like sports fans who, when caught up in the excitement of the “big game,” exaggerate its importance. But we will try not to lose sight of the Vichian fact that, while genuinely important, this presidential election will not decide the outcome of the battle for the soul of America, nor will it determine how much time the nation has left before it enters the dustbin of history.

We will try to remember that, in the end, politicians will not make these crucial determinations. They will play a big part in the drama as it unfolds, but the battle for the future of the nation is taking place not in Washington but in the nation’s schools and universities, in its media and entertainment centers, in its churches and synagogues, in the living rooms and dining rooms where family discussions occur and children learn from the adults around them about right and wrong, morals, mores, manners, values, honor, prudence, courage, and what it means to be a responsible citizen.

This fight will be decided by the nation’s novelists, artists, teachers, movie makers, playwrights, composers, religious visionaries, advertisers, and celebrity role models, or as my old friend Claes Ryn once put it, those people “who draw us into their way of experiencing the world.” In fact, Claes argues persuasively that enthrallment of American conservatives with politics over the past fifty years or so has actually been deleterious to the overall battle against those who would dismantle “what remains of American and Western civilization” because it has turned the movement’s attention away from the fact that the crisis at hand is not political, but moral, spiritual and cultural.

We will try to remember that political contests don’t decide the battle over the nation’s future. They provide insights into how it is proceeding. They act as a scorecard, a body count, if you will. The moral, spiritual and cultural rot that we, Claes, and other conservatives lament is not caused by the likes of Hillary and Bill Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, John Kerry, and George Soros.

Individuals such as these are the swollen, red spots that appear on the skin and signal that gangrene is eating away at the flesh below. Their importance within the political system is an indication that American society is losing its sense of honor, temperance, honesty, courage, and justice; its love of country; and its commitment to the future. This is something conservatives should not forget in the election frenzy that lies ahead. And when it comes to politics, they should look for men and women who are not caught up in their own importance as politicians, but have a much better understanding of their role in the battle in which they have enlisted.

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT.

In the midst of a war in which soldiers, sailors, and marines die every day, many of them at the hands Iranian Revolutionary Guards or their Iranian-equipped Iraqi allies, the general anguish over the fate of the 15 Britons taken hostage two weeks ago seems at times a bit strange. After all, if the Mullahs had simply chosen instead to murder these 15 particular sailors and marines, the incident would have caused a short uproar and then been dropped like all the others. To question the deaths of allied troops at the hands of the Iranians or to hold the Islamic Republic accountable for those deaths would be to alter the assumptions about the nature and origin of the enemy that underpin the entire war effort. And that would simply be too much work at this time.

Nevertheless, there is something uniquely disconcerting, humiliating, and psychologically troubling about the current situation, largely due to the knowledge that these lives can, in theory, still be saved. Moreover, whether we like it or not, the entire event reveals a great many uncomfortable facts about the parties involved and what may lie ahead.

For example, the fact that the Iranians took the hostages in the first place suggests several things about that regime, its goals, and the means by which

it intends to achieve those goals. It seems, to us at least, that the Baby Boom-era Iranians, like their Boomer counterparts in the American Democratic Party, are deeply nostalgic and intent on trying to relive the halcyon days of their youth when they held 66 Americans hostage for 444 days and exposed Jimmy Carter for the silly little fool that he was. The only difference here is that the radicals Democrats in this country are reliving a fictional victory, while the Iranians are attempting to repeat a notable triumph.

We also know that the Iranian regime continues to view international law and standards of prisoner treatment as little more than tools by which to vilify the West. The clearly forced and scripted confessions of the British sailors – and the female sailor in particular – indisputably violate the Geneva Convention. But the Mullahs understand fully that the world expects those rules to be applied (and misapplied) to Western powers only, and that they, revolutionaries all, will not be held to account by anyone for any actions they may take or violations they may perpetrate.

Beyond this, we may also speculate about the Mullahs' motives and their perception of the war and its progress based on their actions over the past couple of weeks. Military affairs columnist and blogger Austin Bay, for one, believes that the capture and detention of the Britons indicate that the Iranian regime is insecure in its standing with its own people and is therefore frantic to shore up domestic support. "This latest hostage-taking incident," Bay wrote last week, "smacks of desperation, not revolutionary fervor." Faced with myriad and mounting problems at home (which we have detailed repeatedly this spring), the Mullahs have been forced to resort to the only technique that has historically proven successful in rallying the nation to their cause, that is the taking of Western hostages. And while the Mullahs and their political figurehead, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, may talk tough, their actions, at least according to Bay, belie that toughness.

But whatever this incident says about the Iranians, in our estimation it says a great deal more about the British. Over the past week or so, many

commentators have argued that the weakness shown by the Blair government in the face of direct provocation and aggressive humiliation by the Iranian regime is proof that political correctness has taken a steep toll on Britain and that her leaders today are simply too feckless and beaten down to do what a Maggie Thatcher or Winston Churchill would have done when faced with similar provocation.

That's all well and good, of course. But we think such a depiction of events and their causes actually underplays the extent of Britain's collapse and the importance of this collapse to the future of the United States and the West in general. Or to put this another way, this is not just another episode of irresolution in the face of crisis. It is something more significant altogether.

For the last several years, we, among others, have made our long-term forecasts about this century and about the nations that will dominate it based on one simple rule, namely that those who speak English are far better positioned to do well than those who don't. From Great Britain to Ireland to Canada and the United States; from Singapore to Hong Kong to India; from Australia to New Zealand, the most successful nations of the world share a common thread, and that's the English language.

It's not that there is something magical about speaking English. It's that those nations in which English is spoken by some significant percentage of the population are likely to have been British colonies at some point, which means that they had the great fortune of having British common law, British customs, and British institutions imposed upon them. It is fashionable in the West these days to deplore colonialism and everything that it entailed. But the fact of the matter is that those nations that were colonized by the British have, by and large, reaped immeasurable benefits from their purported subjugation.

The unique blend of influences on British culture – from the Catholic scholars Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, to the Christian reformer John Calvin and

the Scottish Presbyterians, to philosophers like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes and economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo – combine to foster an ethos uniquely suited to individual liberty, individual resourcefulness, political liberalism, and economic progress.

The inimitable Mark Steyn, who is well invested in the idea that “demography is destiny,” has argued that the reason that the Brits, inhabitants of an erstwhile unimportant island in the North Atlantic, were able to conquer the world is because they were the first to conquer infant mortality, which thereby gave them a striking demographic advantage over all challengers or potential challengers. He is right, of course, but only to a point. Yes, the Brits conquered infant mortality, but that was hardly an accident and hardly the causal variable in their success.

The British were able to defeat infant mortality because of the traditions, laws, and institutions that they had developed over centuries – respect for the individual, equality under the law, the value of thrift and of hard work, the importance of trade, representative government to check executive authority, transparency in government and business, etc. – which lent themselves nicely to individual and societal initiative and which, in turn, promoted “progress” that was previously unimaginable in all of human history. Included in this progress, of course, were medical and other scientific advances that facilitated a steady increase in the percentage of live births and a decrease in infants dying from difficult deliveries. The Brits’ demographic victory was anything but coincidence.

Nor is it coincidence that the very same customs, principles, and institutions that enabled that victory were the ones that the British exported to their colonies and which predisposed those colonies to success. For nearly four hundred years, the world’s centers of industry, finance, and individual liberty have been found either in Great Britain or its former colonies. Even today, the nations (or erstwhile city-states) that have transitioned from the third world to the first are those which have benefited from English

traditions and institutions, either directly (Hong Kong, Singapore) or indirectly, through American occupation and reconstruction (Japan, South Korea).

As we mention above, we are hardly the only ones ever to note this connection. Indeed, many, many others have done it far better than we. But in all the discussion of Great Britain, the institutions that have fostered its success, and the subsequent success of its colonial progeny, rarely is one of the most important such institutions mentioned and given anywhere the credit it deserves for shaping the modern world. That institution, of course, is the Royal British Navy.

The Royal British Navy was the first truly successful modern military, the first military capable of global force projection, the first military capable of enforcing global norms of behavior and of likewise enforcing the wishes of the Crown. For two hundred years, the Royal British Navy not only enabled the spread of English values through conquest, but did so as well through the creation and protection of free shipping lanes. The Brits defeated Napoleon at Trafalgar; they single handedly ended the Atlantic slave trade; and they enabled global commerce to emerge and thrive.

And just as it is no mere coincidence that former British colonies are uniquely positioned to emulate the mother country’s economic and political successes, it is no mere coincidence that they have been likewise uniquely positioned to emulate her military success. Again, take a look at the world’s most successful militaries. Nearly every efficient, powerful military capable of global force projection belongs either to Britain or to its former colonies. And it has been this way for at least a century.

Every major war in the past one hundred years – from World War I to World War II; from Korea to the first Gulf War; from Afghanistan to Iraq – has involved some combination of British, American, Canadian, and Australian forces, who have almost always been overwhelmingly successful in their undertakings. The United States military is the strongest and most impressive in the world, maybe in the history of the world. As Canadian Mark Steyn noted last week,

many Canadians trace their nation's coming of age, its "birth" as a nation, to its military contributions to the Commonwealth, made during Easter of 1917 in Vimy, France, "when a nation of seven million lost over three-and-a-half thousand in a few days." And likewise the Australians, always among the fiercest and most reliable allies, trace their own coming of age to contributions they made at Gallipoli.

It is hardly unusual to hear Americans complain about the burden they bear being the "world's policeman." But America came by this work honestly, inheriting it from the British, and it has never had to do it alone. Until now.

The real tragedy of the events in Iran over the last couple of weeks is that they demonstrate conclusively that the founding member of this military dynasty has all but given up the fight. Earlier this year, Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed to cut the size of the Royal Navy dramatically as part of a larger military budget cut. *Investors' Business Daily* notes that by "this time next year, according to plans, the British navy that once ruled the seas will be roughly the size of the Belgian navy." And senior British military officials have been quoted by the (London) *Telegraph* complaining that the budget cuts "will turn Britain's once-proud Navy into nothing more than a coastal defense force."

Unfortunately, that's not the worst of it. The British have cut their naval forces dramatically before, most notably during the inter-bellum period last century, yet those cuts have largely been temporary, rescinded in the face of growing threats. But this time, the cuts are actually being made while staring down a known and very dangerous threat. And no one in the U.K. is likely to advocate very vocally that the Navy be rebuilt.

It would appear that the Brits have lost the will to fight for their civilization. The most disturbing aspect of the drama in the Middle East is the fact that neither the British marines and sailors captured nor the warship that ostensibly guarded them had the authority under the British rules of engagement to take defensive action. The sailors gave up because that is what they had been instructed to do.

And the Brits are not the only ones who appear on the verge of giving up. Though it's not often mentioned in the media, one of the United States' most valuable allies in Afghanistan is Canada, whose soldiers, unlike those provided by the rest of NATO, are actually ready and able to engage in combat missions. But one can be forgiven for wondering how long that will be the case. Last week, Mark Steyn cited a recent Ipsos-Reid poll of Canadians that showed surprising little support for the maintenance of a military that has an active combat capability. He wrote:

The overall numbers in the Ipsos-Reid poll came out this way: 58 per cent of Canadians favour a peacekeeping-only military. Not just for Afghanistan, or Iraq, but for everything, including presumably if the enemy were scrambling ashore at Halifax or Vancouver. And, while it would be easy to blame those numbers on Quebec's Frenchness, that doesn't quite account for it: after all, it's hard to see 71 per cent of Frenchmen voting to scrap any combat role for their troops. What's a force de frappe if it forswears the frappe? And in any case, even if you factor out Quebec, all one can say is that Canada's residual war-fighting capability retains the support of a bare majority among the ROC.

Steyn suggests that these results are indicative of the fact that his homeland is in the grips of "a terminal illness." He's right, naturally. And this illness, unfortunately, is the very same one that is currently gripping Great Britain and which long ago killed the militaries of Continental Europe. This illness can probably best be described as a combination of ignorance, delusion, ingratitude, and what economists and students of interest group theory call the "free-rider" problem. Europe has been able to forswear war and the tools of war in large part because it doesn't have to worry about providing for its own defense.

The Europeans can (and do) prattle on endlessly about the obsolescence of war, about "soft power," and about other daft post-modern illusions because they are able sleep comfortably at night knowing that very nation they vilify as the world's most troublesome

is nevertheless ensuring their freedom. The members of the European Union believe that their accomplishments over the last 50 years are remarkable, yet they do not appear even for a second to grasp that none of them would have been possible without the United States providing for their defense; freeing up billions of dollars to pour into the welfare state, stopping the Soviets, enforcing the peace.

And now it seems that both the British and the Canadians feel comfortable enough in their post-modern existences to cast their lots with the Europeans, to take on the trappings of a civilization committing suicide but to count on the Americans to ensure that that suicide never takes place. With the exception of Australia, which lives in a potentially very dangerous neighborhood, and a handful of nations in central Europe that have experienced tyranny first hand, America now stands alone.

The only questions we're left with are how long and how effectively America will stand on its own. As we have noted many times before in these pages, we believe that betting against the United States is a terrible mistake. But we are not foolish enough to believe that the nation's ultimate triumph will be easily won.

The political left in this country tends, like the Brits and the Canadians, to believe that the continentals have things all figured out. One might think that logic would compel the Democrats to reevaluate this belief with regard to military matters, but logic doesn't appear ever to factor anywhere into their calculations. Any group of people who can witness the manifest failure of the European social welfare model and still wish to emulate it cannot be trusted to be able to discern the effects of the failure of the European national security model. What the Democrats are doing today; the attitudes and beliefs they are embracing and the actions they are taking to undermine the efficacy of the Commander-in-Chief are Euro-inspired and not merely dangerous but possibly deadly.

If there is anything that can be taken away from the current Iranian hostage crisis – and from the previous one as well – it is that while diplomacy and negotiation may have their place in achieving peaceful outcomes, peace is still best achieved through strength. The Brits seem to have chosen to ignore this chestnut. That's unfortunate. And it's likely to be quite grizzly as well. We can only hope that American politicians and voters are watching and will relearn this lesson without it having to be brought home to them again.

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