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THEY SAID IT

But even democracy ruins itself by excess – of democracy. Its basic principle is the equal right of all to hold office and determine public policy. This is at first glance a delightful arrangement; it becomes disastrous because the people are not properly equipped by education to select the best rulers and the wisest course. “As to the people they have no understanding, and only repeat what their rulers are pleased to tell them”; to get a doctrine accepted or rejected it is only necessary to have it praised or ridiculed in a popular play . . . Mob-rule is a rough sea for the ship of state to ride; every wind of oratory stirs up the waters and affects the course. The upshot of such a democracy is tyranny or autocracy; the crowd so loves flattery, it is so “hungry for honey,” that at last, the williest and most unscrupulous flatterer, calling himself the “protector of the people” rises to supreme power....

The more Plato thinks of it, the more astounded he is at the folly of leaving to mob caprice and gullibility the selection of political officials—not to speak of leaving it to those shady and wealth-serving strategists who pull the oligarchic wires behind the democratic stage. Plato complains that whereas in simpler matters – like shoe-making – we think only a specially-trained person will serve our purpose, in politics we presume that everyone who knows how to get votes knows how to administer a city or a state. When we are ill we call for a trained physician, whose degree is a guarantee of specific preparation and technical competence—we do not ask for the handsomest physician, or the most eloquent one....

Commentary on Plato’s view of democracy in *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant, 1926.

A ROUGH SEA FOR THE SHIP OF STATE.

Last week, while watching part of the debate among the Democratic Party’s presidential hopefuls, it occurred to us that when the dust settles on the great American experiment in democracy, as it must eventually settle on all human endeavors, the simplest explanation for its demise will be that this great nation somehow managed to develop and implement the dumbest method for selecting its leaders that has ever been utilized in the entire history of mankind, beginning with that fateful day in the long lost mists of time when the first two sub-human hominids recognized that they had a better chance of surviving if they worked together, one leading and the other following.

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Over many, many millennia, groups of individuals, both large and small, have employed a wide range of criteria for choosing leaders depending on the specific needs of the group at the time. One can assume that brute strength and courage were dominant factors for thousands of years. Over time, it can be assumed that intelligence became increasingly important, followed by character, personality, and even appearance.

Various methods have been utilized over the years for determining who had the proper combination of necessary talents. In the early days, individual combat was certainly common. Group acclamation was probably not unusual, which is a limited form of democracy. Heredity was the method of choice in medieval Europe for centuries. Regardless of method, one can be sure that all of the various processes were routinely influenced by numerous inventive ploys, including but not limited to propaganda, deceit, bribery, murder, sex, and romance.

One doesn't have to be a student of history to recognize that no single method has proved over the years to be consistently superior to any other. Even during the tumultuous days of the Roman Empire, when emperors were often chosen by the rabble within the army, a very good leader would occasionally burst upon the scene.

America's founding fathers had a great deal of difficulty committing to paper a method for selecting a national leader. At one point, they considered getting around this by simply proclaiming George Washington to be the nation's king. When they gave up on that idea, they recognized that "the people" had to be involved. But as learned men, they were very familiar with Plato's concerns about the perils of plebiscitary democracy, as noted in the "They Said It" section above.

As a result, they made extraordinary efforts to mitigate the problems he foresaw by a variety of innovations designed both to limit the power of the numerical majority and, most importantly, to make provision within the process for both the direct and the indirect input of individuals defined by Madison in Federalist No. 10 as those "whose wisdom may best discern the

true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations."

The Electoral College was an example of an effort to *directly* involve such exemplary individuals in the selection procedure. But any fair reading of the concerns voiced by the founders during this process reveals an understanding among all of them that the success of the entire venture depended on both the direct and the indirect participation in the government of men and women who were capable of setting aside factional considerations when necessary to advance the best interests of the nation and to uphold the intent, not just the letter of the Constitution.

And therein lies the problem today. For all practical purposes, there is no coterie of "wise men" within the American political system today whose "patriotism and love of justice" is widely enough recognized and respected by the general public to provide them with the moral, intellectual, and national stature necessary to place any check whatsoever on the excesses of plebiscitary democracy as described and foreseen by Plato.

For almost 200 years, this role was assumed, with mixed success, by the two political parties, which competed for public approbation as the party that best represented the traditional values of the nation. In recent years, this competition has diminished in keeping with declining respect among Americans for these traditional values. Not surprisingly, this diminution has been accompanied by a similar decline in the influence of both parties over the political activities of their member politicians.

And today, presidential candidates come to the American public not armed with the full support of their party but backed by an independently assembled cortege of close friends, financial supporters, political advisers, public relations specialists, pollsters, state and national organizers, volunteers, large numbers of fully committed special interest groups, and, of course, a host of shady and wealth-serving strategists who pull the oligarchic wires behind the democratic stage.

Today, there are no “smoke filled rooms” of “old hands” or patriots involved in the selection process who have intimate knowledge of the moral and practical strengths and weaknesses of the various candidates, people who could, if they felt it necessary, convince their party that, out of respect for the office of the presidency and concern for the nation, it should withhold support from a particular candidate. In short, there are no individuals who are “capable of setting aside factional considerations” when necessary to speak up for the best interests of the nation.

Today, the American public is “on its own,” expected to choose wisely from among a group of candidates who are spending millions of dollars each to mold and present a public image that may or may not bear any relationship to their actual person. Today, the American public chooses a president the same way it decides whether to buy David Oreck’s “10 pound vacuum cleaner” or a competitive product that some guy at Home Depot describes as a better deal.

Today, American presidents are chosen by mob rule, a process during which every wind of oratory stirs up the waters and affects the course. Like it or not, this is a prescription for disaster. It remains to be seen whether it will, as Plato suggests, lead to tyranny or autocracy, but one can say with absolute certainty that it will someday lead to the election of a truly incompetent and corrupt fool, the likes of whom will make past bad choices look like Julius Caesar by comparison. We can only hope that it does not happen during a time of great crisis either internationally or domestically, which means we probably need to get very lucky this time around.

IS HARRY REID STUPID, OR JUST ONE OF US?

Given his public statements over the past couple of weeks, one could be forgiven for thinking that Harry Reid, the Senate Majority leader, is, well, stupid. It’s not that he undermined the troops while they are engaged with a nasty and dangerous enemy or that he may well have damaged the soldiers’ morale by declaring their mission a failure – though he did both. What gave him the appearance of being stupid, really mind-achingly stupid, was the rationale he offered for believing that the war in Iraq has been lost. “This war is lost,” Reid declared, “and this surge is not accomplishing anything, as is shown by the extreme violence in Iraq this week.”

You got that? The war is lost, and the surge is failing, and Reid knows this because...there is violence...in the war zone. Imagine that, violence in a war zone.

Now, for the moment, set aside the fact that “the surge” hasn’t even been fully implemented; that just over half of the troops to be “surged” into Iraq have even arrived. Set aside as well, the fact that any attempt to assess the change in tactics would be ridiculous at this point, since they have only been in place for a handful of weeks. At some point during the war and during the surge this will matter, of course, but for the time being, it’s irrelevant. What matters, in the here-and-now, is the reasoning (or lack thereof) employed by the Senate Majority Leader for determining the outcome of the war, which, pardon us for saying so, was moronic.

This is the way children think, really young children, children who have yet to develop their full cognitive capabilities. Reid looked at one negative aspect of the war and extrapolated wildly and ridiculously. As Middle East analyst/columnist Walid Phares pointed out, we should all be incredibly grateful that Reid wasn’t present at the Battle of the Bulge just over 62-years ago. Reid probably would have surrendered at Bastogne, misinterpreting the German offensive as evidence of an Allied defeat, rather than what it was, the last desperate gasp of the dying Nazi regime.

Of course, the real problem here is that Reid is probably not stupid. Or, more accurately, we cannot determine that he's stupid based exclusively on this one incident. He may be self absorbed, ill-informed, and unable to see the proverbial "bigger picture." But then, who in Washington isn't? Certainly, these traits don't distinguish Reid among his colleagues in the Democratic Party.

And just as certainly, the outlandishly faulty logic he used to reach his conclusion about Iraq doesn't distinguish that issue from dozens of others on which Reid and his fellow Washington lifers have come to similarly defective conclusions. On everything from global warming (er... "climate change") to the economy to the war on terror to the political opposition, this country's political class tends to take the tiniest, flimsiest evidence and extrapolate entirely unjustified conclusions.

November and December were warmer than usual, much warmer. Clearly, that's global warming. By contrast, January, February, and March were colder and wetter than usual, much colder and much wetter. No worries. That's "climate change." Bad hurricane season with much destruction? Global warming. Weak hurricane seasons with no destruction? Climate change.

In the 2004 presidential campaign, the fact that the dot-com bust and 9/11 had combined to cause a slight net loss in jobs over the course of President Bush's first term was evidence of "the worst economy since the Great Depression." Of course, there was no word on whether the economy of '04 was worse than the economy of '92, which was the last "worst economy since the Great Depression" (and, not coincidentally, the last time that there was a Republican incumbent in the White House). Today, the housing recession, the booming stock market, and rising executive pay are evidence of the "most unfair" economy in the nation's history.

Similarly, the war on terror and the doctrine of preemption are "the worst foreign policy blunders" in the nation's history. Just this weekend, Hillary Clinton

denounced President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech as "one of the darkest blots on leadership we've ever had," and "one of the most shameful episodes in American history," which only makes sense, since Bush is "the worst president ever."

There's no doubt that all of this is stupid. These are stupid proclamations based on stupid and largely inconsequential "evidence." But again, those making the proclamations are themselves not stupid. So why do they do it?

The answer, we believe, is both complicated and more than a little troubling. For starters, it is important to remember who exactly runs Washington these days, namely "liberal Baby Boomers." This is a dangerous combination. As liberals, these folks have no sense of history, no desire to learn from history, and no conception of the "long term" or of long-term consequences. As Baby Boomers, they tend to be self-absorbed, concerned only about their own experiences, and absolutely certain that their experiences are somehow, bigger, better, and more relevant than any other experiences in the history of the world, which explains why all of their proclamations are superlatives (worst ever, hottest ever, etc.).

Now, one might question our use of the term "liberal" in describing these power brokers, objecting that conservatives still control one branch of the federal government and, until four months ago, controlled a second. But that's just not true. *Republicans* ran Congress and *Republicans* still control the White House, but most of these Republicans are anything but conservative. Conservatism is more a temperament than an ideology. And though the likes of Chuck "worst foreign policy blunder ever" Hagel may support some traditional conservative causes, he and his ilk are not conservatives temperamentally, espousing as they do the same disregard for history, for tradition, custom, and what Burke termed "prejudice" as do traditional liberals. These Republicans are just as liberal temperamentally as their Democratic counterparts, and thus just as susceptible to foolish, ahistorical reasoning and policy prescriptions.

It is also important to remember that the overwhelming majority of those who occupy positions of power in Washington are, like their constituents, victims of an education system that has been crumbling for decades and that has done an exceptionally poor job of preparing its charges for the responsibilities of republican rule. Many of our leaders boast undergraduate degrees from the nation's most prestigious universities and law degrees from its finest law schools. But that in no way guarantees that they are well educated.

It has been over half-a-century now since William F. Buckley's book *God and Man at Yale* first exposed the rot that had infected his *alma mater* and other such respected institutions of higher learning. Nearly six decades ago, it was already clear that the American university had abandoned its traditional educative mission to concentrate instead on the creation of "atheistic socialists," as Buckley put it. And the "counter-culture" movement of the '60s only compounded these problems, with many students (today's leaders) buying into the idea of nonconformity as the ultimate human virtue and believing that "challenging the system" was the ultimate end of their education. Is it any wonder then that they have no sense of history, no ability to think critically, and no real concept of civic virtue, in spite of their esteemed educations?

Finally, it is important to remember that the politicians in Washington are, well, politicians. They are professional electioneers, men and women skilled in raising campaign cash and winning votes. And they know their constituents.

Like Senator Reid, these constituents are not really stupid. But they are, in many ways, self-absorbed, ill-informed, poorly educated, and unable or unwilling to see the bigger picture, also like Reid and the rest of this nation's permanent political class.

By any historical measure, the war in Iraq has been remarkably successful. A long-standing enemy regime has been removed. A friendly successor government has been installed. An insurgency has largely been contained, as has a once-burgeoning

civil war that threatened to engulf the entire region in sectarian violence. And all of this has been done with the loss of only 3,000 American soldiers. As the inimitable Mark Steyn put it yesterday, these "losses are devastating for the individuals' families but they are historically among the lowest in any conflict this nation or any other has fought." American servicemen continue to believe in their mission, and incidents of atrocities committed by rogue soldiers have been remarkably few and far between.

Yet the American people tend to agree with Harry Reid and his fellow defeatists that the outcome of this war has already been determined and that the United States has lost. When Reid declared two weeks ago that the war will continue to be a political bonanza for his party and that Democrats will almost certainly pick up Senate seats (and probably House seats as well) in the next election because of the war, few doubted that he was right. The American people are tired of the war and no longer believe either that it was worth the effort or that the effort can come to a good end.

Part of this, of course, is that President Bush has, as we have noted countless times, done a poor job of communicating the war's importance to the American public. But just as big a part is the American peoples' collective inability to grasp the war's importance and its relatively minor cost on their own.

It is no surprise either that the American public tends as well to believe that a handful of hot days is suggestive of global climate change and thus necessitates government action to fix the problem. A few pictures of polar bears looking forlorn and clinging to ice bergs here, a handful of misleading, alarming, unreliable, and largely inaccurate forecasts there and the American people are willing to toss aside economic progress in the pursuit of smaller "carbon footprints." Never mind that the warming trend of the last 150 years is relatively minor in historical terms or that there is nothing even approaching scientific consensus on the matter of man's role in "climate change." Historical perspective doesn't matter, at least it doesn't matter as much as the poor, pathetic polar bears.

Given the American public's vanity, its feeble education, and its incredibly short attention span, it is not unreasonable to think that Harry Reid and his ilk are not stupid after all, that, in fact, they have the American public figured out rather well and will thus be able to consolidate political power. As we note in the piece above, there are inherent risks to democratic governance, and one of these is that the masses are easily manipulated.

We'd like to believe that the American people will see through Reid's foolishness. But we're not convinced of it. Irving Babbitt once noted that it was said of people in a certain ancient Greek city that while they were not fools, they did just the things that fools would do. Perhaps that's the case with the American public, and Harry Reid is just smart enough to know it.

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