

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

The name of the senate was mentioned with honour till the last period of the empire; the vanity of its members was still flattered with honorary distinctions: but the assembly which had so long been the source, and so long the instrument of power, was respectfully suffered to sink into oblivion. The senate of Rome, losing all connexion with the imperial court and the actual constitution, was left a venerable but useless monument of antiquity on the Capitoline hill.

The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Volume I, Edward Gibbon, 1776.

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WHITHER CONGRESS?

Much has been written and said recently about the U.S. Congress's extraordinarily low approval rating. A recent Gallop poll, for example, showed that while President Bush's public approval is hovering at an all time low of 33%, Congress's is even lower at 29%. Democrats blame this on Republican obstructionism. Republicans blame it on weak and ineffective Democratic leadership. The mainstream pundit community doesn't seem to care much, preferring instead to concentrate on the presidential number. When asked, most ordinary Americans seem to share the press's indifference and attribute it to the simple fact that "they're all a bunch of lying lowlifes – so what's to like?"

We think there may be more to all of this than meets the eye. Indeed, we would like to posit a somewhat more complicated explanation for the public's low opinion of Congress, not so much because we think this is the answer to end all answers, but because it provides us with an opportunity to discuss some interesting trends in American politics that seem to have gone largely unnoticed by the experts.

Our hypothesis is that the low approval rating of Congress is an early sign that representative democracy has outlived its usefulness as a form of government in much the same way that hereditary monarchy did. For many centuries, the latter served Western civilization as the prototype of good governance. Then, due to several cultural earthquakes, not the least of which were the Reformation and the Enlightenment, the job of managing nations became too complicated to entrust to the whims of one or several families, especially given the attraction that members of these families seemed to have for their cousins.

Confirming the expression that old habits die hard, the process took several centuries. But all along the way there were subtle yet unmistakable signs that this peculiar institution was in trouble. These included, but were not limited to the beheading of Charles I in England in 1649; the beheadings of Marie Antoinette and

her husband King Louie in 1793; the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand, the heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in 1914; and the abdication of the Kaiser as Emperor of the German Empire and King of Prussia in 1918.

We expect the extinction of representative democracy to take a long time also. And we hope that it will be somewhat less bloody. But it is instructive to note that despite the violence involved in the long, slow demise of monarchy, the public's dissatisfaction was usually directed more at the institution itself than at the individual monarchs, who were generally liked or at least tolerated as a source of amusement.

This seems to be the case with America's low regard for its Congressional representatives, who are, for the most part, liked by their constituents, but, when considered as a group performing their official functions, are increasingly held in disdain. This indicates that their unpopularity is generally not personal but is related to the role they fill, or don't fill as the case may be.

This fate is similar to that of used car salesmen, who tend to be affable and, one can assume, well liked by their neighbors, but don't score high in public approval as a class. If there is a qualitative element in the public's growing distaste for their representatives in Congress, it probably relates to the fact that as the job itself has declined in importance and esteem over the years, the eminence and character of the people filling it has naturally tended to decline also.

An example of this process at work can be seen in the history of the social position of railroad firemen in the days when trains ran on coal. The job required strength, stamina, courage, intelligence, and considerable skill. As such, firemen were highly respected members of the community ("With tireless hands he feeds the coal in the thundering monster's maw, And hour by hour he trusts his soul to the God whom he never saw.") Then, with the advent of the diesel engine, firemen were no longer needed on trains. But the railroad unions insisted that the

job be retained, so for almost 40, years railroad firemen road along, doing little more than keeping the engineer company. In fact, in some instances where the fireman's job actually was eliminated, engineers received "lonesome pay." Needless to say, the character and skill levels of the men who were hired as firemen declined over the years, as did the community's respect for those who held the position.

A highly simplified way of looking at all of this is that technological innovation was the driving force behind the obsolescence of both monarchy and the fireman's job on the nation's railroads. The positions of Senator and Representative in the United States Congress are threatened by a more primitive force, one described by Nietzsche as the "will to power." In this case this will is being wielded by several institutions that have, slowly over the years, gained political clout at the expense of Congress and are likely to continue to do so until the latter becomes "a venerable but useless monument of antiquity," as the Roman senate did during the days of the Empire.

America's founding fathers tried to protect Congress from this fate by dividing the authority of the national government among three branches and establishing a system of checks and balances to keep this equilibrium in place. Despite the adoption of a number of invariably unwise changes, most of these measures still exist in the law books. Nevertheless, the congressional branch is slowly losing power to the imperial presidency and to a highly activist judiciary. But even more importantly, Congress is yielding power to two other competitors for political influence that the founding fathers didn't fully consider. One of these is the large and ever growing federal bureaucracy and the other is the American business community.

As we've mentioned numerous times in these pages, early in the 20th century Max Weber predicted the extraordinary growth of the influence of the federal bureaucracy. Simply stated, he noted that society was becoming too complex for decisions to be made on the fly by politicians and their coterie of friends and advisors. In the future, he said, "experts" would

increasingly be needed for the proper administration of governments. Eventually, he said, these “experts” would form a third class between labor and capital that would be made up of technical and administrative personnel, “whose share in the economic product depended on skill and educational status rather than on the ownership of property or the power of collective organization.” Among other things, he predicted that this bureaucracy would become “a monolithic power structure as oppressive as that of ancient Egypt and as economically stagnant as that of late imperial Rome.”

Theoretically, at least, this bureaucracy is accountable to Congress. But over the years, it has gained the upper hand over its Congressional overseers through a variety of tactics including, but not limited to massive public relations efforts to build powerful constituencies across the nation and the formation of public employee unions with a great deal of money and grass roots influence. Today, it is far more likely that the Department of Education will someday eliminate Congress than the other way around.

As mentioned earlier, the other force that is gaining enormous political power at the expense of Congress is American industry. There is a certain amount of irony in this for the old time conservative community that once was consumed with fear that American business would eventually be taken over and destroyed by a socialist establishment in Washington. Instead, the business community has turned Congress into a large organization of lackeys on the take, fighting among themselves on behalf of their financial backers in boardrooms across America.

This is not to say that Congress has reached the point of no import. But the job of elected representative is an increasingly mealy one, involving as it does the taking of money in exchange for representing the interests of the “big contributors.” Needless to say, the public is increasingly aware of the distinction between this role and the one designated by the Constitution and envisioned by the nation’s founders, which explains the low “approval ratings.”

Our expectation is that the prestige associated with being a member of Congress will continue to fade in coming years as competitors for political power find new ways to usurp the constitutional prerogatives of these individuals. This will, of course, be accompanied by a continued decline in the quality of the persons filling these posts and a concomitant drop in public approval of their performance.

In the meantime, no one should be surprised, least of all the members of Congress themselves, that the American public is increasing judging the performance of its elected representatives not on the basis of character, courage, perseverance, intelligence, and honesty but on their entertainment value as compared to, say, Rosie O’Donnell. And, wonder of wonder, with a few exceptions most of these representatives are coming up short.

CALL FOR THE SONS-OF-BITCHES.

Two weeks ago, Mort Kondracke, the former editor of *The New Republic* and the current executive editor of *Roll Call* and co-host of Fox News’s “The Beltway Boys,” penned a column in which he did something that very few others in politics have dared to do. He proposed a “Plan B,” a plan that both “the administration and its critics ought to be seriously thinking about,” in the eventuality that the troop “surge” in Iraq fails to produce the desired stabilization of the country.

Kondracke, who has always been a rather cautious, slightly left-of-center purveyor of conventional wisdom, nonetheless wrote boldly about the need to prepare for victory in Iraq even if the presumed “last ditch” surge fails. The plan Kondracke detailed, which he indicated was supported by one member of Congress who wanted to remain anonymous but who argued its merits persuasively, and which he labeled “winning dirty” or “the 80 percent solution,” goes as follows:

The 80 percent alternative involves accepting rule by Shiites and Kurds, allowing them to violently suppress Sunni resistance and making sure that Shiites friendly to the United States emerge victorious . . .

Winning will be dirty because it will allow the Shiite-dominated Iraqi military and some Shiite militias to decimate the Sunni insurgency. There likely will be ethnic cleansing, atrocities against civilians and massive refugee flows . . .

Winning dirty would involve taking sides in the civil war – backing the Shiite-dominated elected government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and ensuring that he and his allies prevail over both the Sunni insurgency and his Shiite adversary Muqtada al-Sadr, who's now Iran's candidate to rule Iraq.

Now, we don't mean to pick on Kondracke. After all, as we note above, what he did in even raising "Plan B" is more than almost anyone else in Washington has been willing to do. Certainly, it is more than anything done by the blathering narcissists in Congress, who might actually be expected to come up with plausible plans B. There's no question that they can tell us what's wrong with the current strategy, but heaven forbid one should ask, say, Harry Reid or Chuck Hagel or John Murtha what should be done instead.

But while one must give Kondracke high marks for daring, there are several serious problems with the Plan B he suggests. For starters, there's the question of the rest of the Middle East. It's a nice thought to say that we should ensure that the Shiites who end up ruling the new Iraq are "friendly to the United States," but even if we could be certain of this loyalty (which is dubious at best), placating the United States would be the least of the Iraqi Shiites' worries. The violent suppression of Sunnis in Iraq would all but guarantee a broader and bloodier regional sectarian conflict, with the Sunni-dominated governments of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, etc. coming to the aid of their religious brethren, and the Iranian Shiites responding in turn.

Right now, the sectarian bloodbath is confined to Iraq. After "Plan B," that would almost certainly not be the case.

Just as troubling would be the escalation of tensions between Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey. Kondracke suggests that American troops would be stationed in Kurdish territories "to ward off the possibility of a Turkish invasion," but that would hardly preclude increased hostilities. Nor, for that matter, would it facilitate friendly relations between America and its second-closest ally in the region, the one Middle Eastern Muslim country with a strong and proud tradition of secularism. The Kurds are truly Iraq's most striking success story, but there's no assurance that that success would be sustained in the face of a prolonged conflict with Turkey.

That said, the biggest problem with the idea of allowing any force – be it Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish, American, or otherwise – to do what is necessary to win this war decisively is that at this point, neither the American people nor their political "leaders" (and we use that word advisedly) nor even their military are prepared for the type of violence that would entail. Of course, in Kondracke's defense, this is the principal problem in Iraq in general, not just with Plan B, but with Plan A, Plan C, Plan D, and every other plan one could possibly imagine. War, by definition, is brutal. Yet too many Americans are unwilling even to entertain the possibility that this particular war might have casualties, on either side.

This wasn't always the case, of course. As recently as 1945, the American people wholeheartedly supported not just the use of American force, but the use of American force in the exercise of extreme violence. The firebombing of Dresden, and the dropping of atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima are just three examples of the horrors of war that the American people once understood as necessary evils but which they would never even dare to contemplate today.

This is largely a failure of leadership. American political leaders are unable and unwilling to make the case to their constituents that there are some things, as

the sayings go, “worth fighting for,” “worth dying for,” and “worth killing for.” Part of this is metaphysical and related to modern liberalism’s inability to manage reality. But part of it is pure fecklessness. Making a morally defensible case for violence is difficult, and most of our political elites would therefore rather not try. It is far easier simply to recite bumper-sticker clichés about how “violence never solved anything” than it is to explain the conditions under which violence can be both necessary and beneficial.

What is truly disturbing about all of this is that the delusion that war can somehow be less than brutal or less than violent appears to have carried over into the one sphere of American society that should be free of such fantasies, namely the military. We should stress here that this is not a knock on American troops, who remain the best trained, bravest, and brightest armed forces in the history of the planet. But it is a knock on the political operators – both inside and outside of the military – who have accepted the dictates of post-modern political correctness and have thus imperiled both the soldiers under their command and the armed forces’ broader mission.

There can be no question that the immediate post-Cold War era, the decade of the 1990s, was an era of social experimentation in the American military. Promotions to the highest levels of service were made based in part on the acceptance of politically correct principles and even in the furtherance of “feminism” and diversity. Military standards were compromised to accommodate less physically capable applicants (i.e. women in combat roles), budgets were slashed, and even the basic responsibilities of the military were altered, focusing more on civilian outreach and peace keeping than on “war winning.”

Some of the results of this social experimentation were recently documented by the columnist and former Army officer Ralph Peters, who wrote thusly:

The Army hasn’t fielded a four-star with the breadth of vision to wage war at the strategic level and the killer instinct to win on the battlefield since Gen. Barry McCaffrey retired

a dozen years ago. As the generals who led infantry platoons and companies in Vietnam fade from the ranks, we face an incongruous situation in which our lieutenants, captains and majors are combat veterans, while the generals above them never fought in a direct-fire engagement or led daily patrols through Indian country.

Junior officers now have a better grasp of what war means than Army generals do. Platoon leaders want to win. The generals want to make people happy. For two generations, we’ve trained military leaders to be statesmen in uniform, downplaying pugnacity and guts. We sent promising officers for Ivy League doctorates (thereby cutting off at least one of their . . . um . . . eggs), stressed political assignments, and inducted them into the Washington-insider cult of Salvation Through Negotiations.

Now we have bobble-head generals who nod along with the diplomats who want to hold their Versailles Conference before winning the war. It’s past time for our senior leaders to jettison the political correctness and fight to win. But they honestly don’t know how anymore. They’ve been so thoroughly drugged with failed academic theories about counterinsurgency-with-lollipops that they’re more concerned with avoiding embarrassments than with killing the enemy.

The good news in this is that this isn’t an exclusively American phenomenon, and as militaries go, the American armed forces may be less invested in political correct nonsense than most. The bad news is that among those who are worse are those few allies on whom this nation is relying to help fight our new and vicious Islamist enemy and which were formerly among the most proficient and ferocious militaries on the planet.

Recently, for example, Jeff Jacoby, the token conservative columnist for *The Boston Globe*, discussed the findings of the “Winograd Commission,” a “blue-

ribbon panel appointed last September to investigate Israel's failings in its second Lebanon War." According to Jacoby, "the report is scathing. It documents in damning detail the bungling, the willful blindness, and the almost criminal ill-preparedness that pervaded the highest levels of Israel's government during the war and the years leading up to it." Most damning of all, unfortunately, is the Commission's criticism of the military's role in preparing (or not preparing, as the case may be) for war. To wit:

Says the Winograd Commission . . . "the political and military elites in Israel have reached the conclusion that Israel is beyond the era of wars." Unlike their forbears, who understood that the Jewish state would never have peace until its enemies decided to lay down their arms, today's Israeli leadership imagines that it can achieve peace by means of restraint and retreat.

"Since Israel did not intend to initiate a war," the report concludes, senior officials decided that Israel "did not need to be prepared for 'real' war."

Jacoby's observations track closely those made by other commentators who have noted the Winograd Commission's deeply distressing findings. Among other grave concerns raised by a number of those commentators is the viability of the world's "back up" plan for dealing with Iranian nuclear weapons. It has long been presumed that if all else fails, Israel, the one nation most threatened by Iran's nuclear ambitions, would handle the problem itself, much as it did with Iraq in 1981. Based on the findings of the Winograd Commission and on the Israeli Defense Force's performance in last summer's war, however, that presumption now seems incredibly foolish. It is highly questionable, in other words, whether the Israelis can muster the political will and the military capability to deal with Iran. All of which is to say that Iran is likely to be America's problem and America's alone.

As for the United States' other unflappable ally, Great Britain, she too is in serious military decline, a decline spurred principally by ideology and delusion. Last

month, at the height of the now all but forgotten hostage crisis, in which the Iranian regime kidnapped 15 British sailors and marines, we wrote the following:

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. They gave up because that is what they had been instructed to do.

In the weeks since, the situation has only grown worse. Last week, the British Chief of the General Staff declared that England's Prince Harry, a graduate of Sandhurst and a second lieutenant in the British Army, would not be allowed to deploy to Iraq with his unit because it would be too dangerous, a decision that Toby Harnden, a columnist for *The (London) Telegraph*, called an "appalling example to the troops of indecisiveness under pressure and capitulation to terrorist threats." Add to this the growing concern, officially denied but serious nonetheless, that incoming Prime Minister Gordon Brown will be less supportive of extensive British involvement in the global war on terror than was Tony Blair, and it becomes difficult to remain terribly optimistic about Britain's long-term ability to contribute to the defense of civilization.

At the onset of World War II, Fleet Admiral Ernest King declared that "when the shooting starts, they call for the sons-of-bitches" (a quote often attributed to General George Patton). The question today is whether there are any sons-of-bitches to call. We don't doubt that there are, though we are concerned that the politicization of the military may make it difficult to find them.

What all of this means is unclear. But we suspect that the outcome is likely to be ugly, if ultimately successful.

Last week, Bernard Lewis, the dean of Middle East and Islamic scholars, wrote that the political situation in the United States, and specifically the atmosphere

of defeatism, is sending our Islamist enemies the message that they have been right all along and that the United States is weak and unwilling to stand and fight. He wrote:

More recent developments, and notably the public discourse inside the U.S., are persuading increasing numbers of Islamist radicals that their first assessment was correct after all, and that they need only to press a little harder to achieve final victory. It is not yet clear whether they are right or wrong in this view. If they are right, the consequences – both for Islam and for America – will be deep, wide and lasting.

This tends to support our long-standing conclusion that the United States will eventually win this war, but not before things turn very nasty and violent. Eventually, we will find our sons-of-bitches, but we are unlikely to do so until we have been prompted to, most likely by another or several other very serious, high-casualty terrorist incidents. We will, in other words, adopt Plan B, but not until Plan A has permitted the death of many, many more Americans.

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