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THEY SAID IT

The liberal billionaires, such as George Soros and Peter Lewis, and the bloggers, such as “blogfather” Jerome Armstrong, are certain of what they’re against....They are passionate in their hostility to the Republican “dictatorship,” the reviled George W. Bush, and his war in Iraq; they despise the evangelical “lizardheads” who live in “Dumbf***istan”; they detest the Clintons as compromisers whose strategy of triangulation has turned the Democrats, as they see it, into me-too Republicans chasing after the middle-class vote; they loathe the centrist Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) and, as famed Hollywood liberal Norman Lear puts it, “Joe ‘F***ing’ Lieberman”; and they are sure, insofar as they give it any thought, that the war on terror is largely a scam that has been sold to the “morons” of middle America.

Their problem is deciding what they are for, other than more power for people like themselves. The “argument” of Bai’s title refers to the long, futile search to develop a positive agenda, beyond support for abortion and gay marriage, that would articulate “some compelling case for the future of American government.” Discussing the political virtue of conveying deep convictions, one member of the Democratic Alliance – the billionaires’ organization funded by Soros and Lewis, among others – has to ask, “What are ours?...once we know them, we can frame them for voters.” The better informed among the billionaires and the bloggers understand that they can’t go back to New Deal liberalism. Says Andy Stern, the one major labor leader connected with the Democratic Alliance: “I like to say to people who want to return to the New Deal that we are now as far from the New Deal as the New Deal was from the Civil War.”

Fred Siegal, *The City Journal*, August 10, 2007, in a review of Matt Bai’s new book, *The Argument: Billionaires, Bloggers, and the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics*.

LEFTIES WITHOUT A CAUSE.

In the closing days of the 19th century Eduard Bernstein created a firestorm among European leftists with a series of articles in which, among other things, he challenged Marx’s contention that revolution was the only means by which socialism could be achieved. As part of his argument, he said that the revolutionary goal of destroying capitalism was not important to him; that his concern was exclusively with the mundane task of improving the condition of the proletariat. Or, as he put it, “The final goal is nothing to me, the movement is everything.”

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Rosa Luxemburg led the attack on Bernstein in a speech to the International Socialism Congress in Stuttgart as follows: “The conquest of political power remains the final goal and that final goal remains the soul of the struggle. The working class cannot take the decadent position of the philosophers....No, on the contrary, without relating the movement to the final goal, the movement as an end in itself is nothing to me, the final goal is everything.”

Now these early socialists were a petulant lot and would therefore never have admitted it, but the truth is that both sides in the dispute served the cause. Bernstein recognized that the Marxist dream of a bloody, world-wide revolution leading to the destruction of capitalism was ultimately unrealistic; that if the proletariat were ever to achieve anything it would be as a result of hands-on, organized, political agitation in the economic marketplace, under the social conditions that actually obtained in the real world.

For her part, Luxemburg recognized that no political movement is anything more than a petty, historically unremarkable quest for power if it has no grander aim than the ambitions of one or a few individuals, no sacred manifesto of beliefs, no sense of a place in history, no “final goal,” by which she meant that “capitalist society” would be “caught in insoluble contradictions which will ultimately necessitate an explosion, a collapse, at which point we will play the role of the banker-lawyer who liquidates a bankrupt company.”

In any case, this once well-known, but now all but forgotten dispute came to mind recently while watching the modern day American legacies of these long ago lefty political leaders debate each other over their plans for the future of the United States and the Democratic Party. The sloganeering is much the same, the anti-war rants, the heartfelt supplications for “the poor,” “the disadvantaged” “the underclass,” the attacks on “the rich,” and the pledges of integrity, solidarity, and, of course, “equality,” once power is achieved.

But most of the heat that was once so much a part of leftist rhetoric has dissipated during the 100-plus years between Eduard’s and Rosa’s debate and the on-going one between Barack and Hillary. Somewhere along the line, Bernstein won. As he foresaw, capitalism was not overthrown, but “the movement” he honored helped to assure that the proletariat reaped their share of the wealth that was created by its success. Indeed, his beloved proletariat are now, for the most part, firmly ensconced among the petit bourgeoisie, and are represented on the political front by individuals who are invariably as wealthy as “the rich” that he and Rosa so despised, “dining on duck,” as the saying goes.

All that remains of “the movement” to which Eduard and Rosa dedicated their lives is the determination to employ the hatred and fears of “the angry and discontented” in a struggle for political power. But even in this there are significant differences.

The old leftist leaders “organized” the angry and discontented *proletariat*, who, arguably, had something about which to be angry and discontented in those days. As part of this process, they inculcated them with the feverish, nonsensical, political, social and economic theories of Karl Marx. They promised nothing less than a total remake of society and, indeed, of man himself. They promised changes that would be based on “science,” designed to address the specific complaints and fears of their “class.”

Today, the “angry and discontented” are not members of the proletariat, but of a spoiled, petulant, ultra left wing middle and upper class, the bourgeoisie if you will, who, by just about any reasonable measure, have very little about which to be angry and discontented. Indeed, a significant subset of today’s “angry and discontented” includes some of the world’s wealthiest individuals, such as billionaires George Soros and Peter Lewis.

Their politics is not class based. It is not even populist in nature. For lack of a better description, it might be called anti-status-quo. President Bush represents the

epicenter of their hatred. But their general disdain and distrust extends to many Democrats who could rightfully be described as hard lefties themselves. In fact, one of the party's former Vice-Presidential candidates, the ultra-liberal Senator Joe Lieberman, is particularly despised by them.

Largely for this reason, the leftist "organizing" works the other way around today. The politicians do not organize the "angry and discontented," the "angry and discontented" organize the politicians, inculcating them not with Marxist drivel, but with even stranger political, social, and economic theories that they have created out of whole cloth by watching "the news" and listening to each other talk.

The resultant problem is that the politicians, Hillary and Barack in this case, are not as simpatico with the "angry and discontented" of their party as Eduard and Rosa were with theirs. They need them and they court them, but they can't find a political formula for dealing with problems that don't exist or are not recognized as problems by that broad section of the middle class electorate that is still reasonably sane.

The practical tension between these "angry and discontented" and the likes of Hillary and Barack stems primarily from the fact that the latter are not angry and discontented about much of anything. They are what might be called "old fashioned" Democrats. Life is good for both of them. They have to fake anger and discontent. Their brand of liberalism references the anger and discontent of black Americans who suffered severe discrimination, of the young men who were drafted to fight in a war in which they didn't believe, of union members who were getting a raw deal from their employers, of the textile and auto worker who had little chance of finding a job if his plant was closed. Hillary and Barack's idea of "the movement" is to continue the work of their political predecessors, to use the power of the government to make these folks, these "natural Democrats," most of whom aren't angry or discontented about anything much today, even more comfortable than they already are.

Moreover, these old-fashioned Democrats have problems of their own. They have to deal with the fact that the Republicans themselves have established, in the years since President Reagan sat in the White House, a strong foothold among the "natural Democrats." After all, George W. Bush is, for all practical purposes, an old-fashioned Democrat himself, a big government, Hubert Humphrey-Lyndon Johnson liberal. Yes, he has some quaint reservations about sodomy and abortion, and some equally quaint notions about the importance of a spiritual element in society, but one can assume that Humphrey and Johnson did also. As such, he provides little or no room in the center-left of the political spectrum for the old-fashioned Democrats like Hillary and Barack. His presence pushes them and their party constantly leftward, closer and closer to what might fairly be called the lunatic fringe, or to put it another way, today's "angry and discontented."

To distinguish themselves from George Bush, Bernstein's American successors now toil on behalf of such things as a lower "carbon footprint," the right of a woman to demand that a sharp object be inserted into the skull of her fully formed "fetus," and, irony of ironies, given the religious antagonism that has always been a central theme of leftist dogma, the "right" of homosexuals to enjoy the holy sacrament of marriage.

One would imagine that Bernstein, this energetic, innovative political thinker, theoretician, and vigorous social activist, would be dismayed to learn that one of the contenders for leadership of the leftist "movement" in the most powerful nation in the world in the opening days of 21st century is Barack Obama, an almost painfully middle class, intellectually uninteresting soul, who seems never to have written or uttered a creative thought about politics, economics, or society as a whole.

Rosa has no progeny whatsoever among today's American leftists, no serious champion of a manifesto of noble beliefs, no one to carry the banner of the "class struggle," no one who dreams of liquidating the capitalist state and turning the mansions of

the rich over to the poor. Certainly, Mrs. Clinton values her own quest for political power above “the movement” itself. But Rosa, who was executed by a shot to the head during a political uprising in Berlin in 1919, would not recognize herself today in Mrs. Clinton’s persona, this wealthy, well coiffed, WASPish, bourgeois ice queen, with her high priced homes in the rich, white suburbs of Connecticut and the chichi neighborhood of Dupont Circle, her wealthy benefactors in the boardrooms of Wall Street, and her cloying concern for “the children.”

It remains to be seen where this is headed. But the bottom line is that all vestiges of the old left are gone from the American political scene. There is no there, there. The angry and discontented still exist, as they have in every society down through the ages. But the modern day left has no means for controlling and focusing their anger and discontent, no unified plan for addressing the issues involved, no widely accepted political platform, no governing philosophy, no overarching economic theory, no vision of the kind of society they would build, no barricades to defend or attack, no dogma to preach, no demented genius like Karl Marx to tell them how to harness this force on behalf of their quest for political power.

Perhaps George Soros should reserve a desk in the basement of the British Museum and get to work on a new and improved version of *Das Capital*, one that envisions a “scientific” method for righting the wrongs so grievously suffered today by a middle class that is bored with materialism, devoid of spiritual moorings, obsessed with the sensate, and lacking in enough knowledge of history, economics, political science, and sociology to formulate a coherent view of the world. If he does, we wish him the same success as Marx enjoyed, as well as the painful carbuncles that helped feed the old fool’s gloomy, bitter, misanthropic view of the world and of mankind.

GOODBYE AND GOOD RIDDANCE TO KARL ROVE?

Though there are two wars being fought thousands of miles away and a presidential campaign just beginning to heat up, all anyone in Washington seemed to want to talk about last week was the resignation of Karl Rove, the deputy White House chief of staff. Why anyone was surprised by or even particularly interested in Rove’s departure, we can’t really say. After all, the guy is President Bush’s chief *political* operative, and given the constraints imposed by the 22nd amendment, George W. Bush has very little politics left in him. In other words, Rove’s continued presence at the White House is extraneous to say the least. Nevertheless, the Bush aide’s resignation was the big story last week, with various candidates, journalists, analysts, columnists, and fellow political operatives from across the political spectrum weighing in on the man’s record, reputation, and legacy.

For our part, we still have a difficult time figuring out what the big deal is. As we noted in the last edition of this newsletter, “we have never fallen under the spell of the cult of Karl Rove.” There’s no question that the guy is a talented political operative, but his reputation for unrivaled genius is, we think, more than a little overblown. Like the late Lee Atwater before him, Rove is cunning, resolute, and a little intimidating. But then, most successful political strategists are. To Democrats, Rove was the ultimate excuse, an explanation for their troubles and their electoral losses that allowed them to place the responsibility for failure on someone else’s shoulders. They hadn’t lost because their ideas were tired and insipid or because their candidates were arrogant and unlikable, but because the dastardly Rove fought dirty and, when that failed, exerted a strange form of mind control on Democratic candidates that made them act like supercilious, unpatriotic jerks.

In any case, with Rove riding off into the proverbial Texas sunset and the rest of Washington obsessing about his legacy, we thought we might as well join in and offer our thoughts on the subject, taking a brief look at what he actually did (as opposed to what his

fans and foes alike think he did) and the effect that his strategic insights – and those of his predecessors – are likely to have on the 2008 campaign.

In a *Washington Post* paean to his onetime colleague, Michael Gerson, the former top speech writer for President Bush, called Rove an avid student of American history. Specifically, he wrote:

I found Rove to be the most unusual political operative I have ever known; so exceptional he doesn't belong in the category. His most passionate, obsessive love – after his wife – is American history. He visits its shrines and collects its scraps – carefully archived pictures of President William McKinley's funeral, original ballots from the 1860 election. And from American history Rove knows: Events are not moved primarily by techniques; they are moved by ideas.

We don't doubt that Gerson is right. Certainly, Rove's keen insight into recent American political history prompted him to take his candidate in a direction that would alter the course of that history. Rove understood that there was nothing to be gained by an electoral strategy of "running to the center," i.e. trying to build a broad electoral coalition, a "big tent," if you will, which had been the standard GOP strategy since Barry Goldwater's embarrassing defeat in 1964. Bush's father had tried to be a centrist, abandoning conservatives and raising taxes, and he paid for it at the ballot box. Bob Dole too had failed to build a "big tent" and was defeated soundly.

Rove also understood that the ideological trends in the nation favored conservatives, that the country had been moving rightward since the early 1970s, and that even the Democrats had begun to play the game on the Republican field. It's easy to forget now, but it was the Democrat Bill Clinton who declared the era of "big government" over and proclaimed that a balanced budget and reform of welfare would be two of his greatest accomplishments. It was the Democrat Clinton who cut the capital gains tax in

1997, and it was the Democratic candidate, Al Gore, who promised, during the 2000 presidential campaign, to *cut* taxes by some \$500 million.

Rove therefore decided that it would likely be more beneficial to his candidate, George W. Bush, to take a different tack, to embrace conservative principles and ideas and to try to win the presidency on the strength of the conservative base. And he was right. Bush's win in the 2000 presidential contest was historically narrow, though it likely would have been much less so were it not for the last minute revelation of the candidate's prior arrest for drunk driving. And given the popularity of the incumbent administration, any win, narrow or otherwise, had to be considered a major upset.

The strategy worked again in the midterm elections of 2002, in which the GOP bucked the historical majority-party midterm decline. And it worked most spectacularly in 2004, when Rove helped engineer President Bush's unlikely reelection, an accomplishment that even Democratic strategist James Carville conceded was "the signature political achievement of my lifetime."

All of this suggests that Rove was indeed very prescient and very smart to reject the conventional wisdom among his party's consultants and to take his candidate in a new direction. But it's not as if he was the first political operative to have had such insights and to have plotted such a strategy. In fact, the aforementioned James Carville did precisely the same thing eight years earlier, only in reverse.

For nearly twenty-five years prior to the 1992 election, Democrats had been proudly running as liberals. And they had been losing. Since 1964, only one self-proclaimed liberal has been elected president, and then only for one term and only because of the stain of Watergate and the brilliant campaign strategy devised by his own chief political operative, the quirky and occasionally brilliant Pat Caddell. The only truly successful Democratic politician over this time span was Bill Clinton, Carville's client, who, like Bush,

rejected the prevailing sentiment in his party and ran a different kind of campaign. Clinton and Carville, of course, ran to the center and eschewed the “liberal” label and managed to cobble together a plurality (though not a majority) of the American electorate.

Now, the interesting thing about Carville is that he has been one of the most outspoken critics of Karl Rove’s strategy, despite the fact that in many ways it mirrored his own. Though Carville readily credits Rove for his stunning electoral triumphs, he has also suggested that those victories came with a significant long-term cost. Last week, Carville wrote that Rove’s pandering to his party’s base had cost the party an entire generation of voters. To wit:

A late July poll for Democracy Corps, a non-profit polling company, shows that a generic Democratic presidential candidate now wins voters under 30 years old by 32 percentage points. The Republican lead among younger white non-college-educated men, who supported President George W. Bush by a margin of 19 percentage points three years ago, has shrunk to 2 percentage points. Ideological divisions between the Republican party and young voters are growing. Young voters generally favor larger government providing more services, 68 per cent to 28 per cent. On every issue, from the budget to national security, young voters responded overwhelmingly that Democrats would do a better job in government.

It is not just Democracy Corps that has found this. A host of new polls and surveys over the course of the past few months has served as a harbinger of a rocky 2008 election for Republicans.

The March poll from the Pew Research Center showed that 50 per cent of Americans identify as Democrats while only 35 per cent say they are Republican. The June NBC-Wall Street Journal poll showed 52 per cent of Americans would prefer a Democratic

president while only 31 per cent would support a Republican, the largest gap in the 20-year history of the survey.

Though we won’t dispute Carville’s contention that the political atmosphere appears difficult for Republicans, we would add a couple of thoughts. First, it is important to remember the source here. Democracy Corps is Carville’s operation, and the guy still gets paid to promote the Democratic Party and its candidates. That suggests to us that things likely are not as dire for the GOP as Carville (and others) would like for us to believe.

Second, and more to the point, by the time Bill Clinton had reached this point in his presidency, the situation looked equally as dire for his party. Republicans had taken Congress for the first time in 40 years and had held it through two successive elections. Republicans were cleaning up in state elections, capturing an overwhelming majority of governorships and winning many heretofore solidly Democratic state legislatures. The Democratic party was in such steep decline that we even wrote a piece positing the theory that Bill Clinton was really a GOP operative, infiltrated into the Democratic party to destroy it from the inside. The Democrats were done. And guys like Carville took much of the blame.

Many conservative analysts and pundits have speculated over the last several years about the “realignment,” of the American electorate. And many liberals have joined this game since the Democratic triumph last fall. We certainly agree that voters have, over the span of a few decades, moved slowly rightward, yet turned sharply to the left last November. But instead of evidence of realignment, we see both developments as signs of “disalignment,” for lack of a better term.

We are inclined to believe that the electorate is largely “unaligned” and will be for some time. The collapse of the traditional political paradigms has thrown the political situation into flux, and voters as a whole appear no more loyal to one party than another. Eight years ago, the GOP was on the ascendance. Today,

it's the Democrats. We would hardly be surprised to see Republicans back in the proverbial driver seat, four or eight years from now. The parties are both intellectually exhausted, and voters are perfectly fine with that, in large part because anything "intellectual" tends to exhaust them and make their heads hurt.

The final irony in all of this is that the 2008 election is all but certain to be fought along Rove-ian and Carville-ian lines, despite the fact that Rove is nearly universally despised by conservatives, who believe that he squandered both the GOP's majority and the world's good will, and that Carville is equally despised by liberals, who think that his brand of centrism destroyed the party and the liberal/progressive movement.

Hillary Clinton is many things, but one thing she is not is stupid. She knows that despite the country's fatigue with George Bush, it is far from ready to embrace a full-fledged liberal anti-warrior. While many of her Democratic primary opponents have fully embraced the so-called "netroots" base and declared a willingness to accept defeat in Iraq, Hillary has been far subtler and far wiser. And once she secures the nomination, she will run back to the center as hard as she can, using every resource she has, including her husband, to convince voters that the last Clinton presidency was not liberal and the next one won't be either. James Carville's strategy worked perfectly for the Clintons before, and they're not about to abandon it now.

On the other side, the Republican candidates seem to understand that none of them has a snowball's chance in Broward County Florida unless he manages to excite the conservative base. Sure, the eventual nominee will move to the center on some issues, as nominees always do, but his principle goal will remain "energizing" the base. It is likely that the nominee will deemphasize the religious aspects of the conservative

movement and aggressively embrace the more secular and broadly appealing items in the conservative canon (i.e. lower taxes, individual responsibility, greater liberty, etc.). But even so, the candidate will stress his conservatism above and beyond all else, in the hopes of getting the base to turn out for him the way it did for Bush and Rove in 2000, 2002, and 2004.

Given the general trend favoring the Democrats, what this means, in our opinion is that the election may well be settled by the far left wing of the Democratic party, the netroots "progressives" who have, in many ways, become the loudest and most energetic voices in American politics. If the netroots types decide to fall in line and hold their noses once more, then Hillary may well win. If, on the other hand, they declare their independence and refuse to support a centrist war-monger, then things could get ugly. As we note in the above piece, the liberal base is "angry and discontented," and we would not be surprised to see a convention next year that is reminiscent of the one that took place in Chicago in 1968, with the "angry and discontented" activist wing of the party in full-blown rebellion.

At the same time, some of the angry left's leaders, including the blogger Markos Moulitsas, have signaled a willingness to accept a candidate like Clinton if it means taking back the White House. Additionally, Moveon.org, another highly influential netroots group, was originally started to bolster the Clintons and may well support Hillary as enthusiastically as it did Bill. Time will tell.

In any case, despite the fact that Karl Rove has been roundly criticized by liberals and conservatives alike over the last week, his strategy will be employed again and a victorious GOP candidate will almost certainly be in Rove's debt for developing the game plan.

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