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THEY SAID IT

This happy people can read. It supports a press conforming to the tastes of the common man, or rather to such tastes as common men can have in common; for the best in each is not diffused enough to be catered for in some adventitious power, which guides it for its own purposes, commercial or sectarian. Superstitions old and new thrive in this infected atmosphere; they are now all treated with a curious respect, as if nobody could have anything to object to them. It is all a scramble of prejudices and rumours; whatever first catches the ear becomes a nucleus for all further presumptions and sympathies.

Advertising is the modern substitute for argument, its function is to make the worse appear the better article. A confused competition of all propagandas--those insults to human nature – is carried on by the most expert psychological methods, which the art of advertising has discovered; for instance, by always repeating a lie, when it has been exposed, instead of retracting it. The world at large is deafened; but each propaganda makes its little knot of proselytes, and inspires them with a new readiness to persecute and to suffer in the sacred cause. The only question is, which propaganda can first materially reach the greatest number of persons, and can most efficaciously quench all the others.

George Santayana, "The Irony of Liberalism," from *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, 1922.

COUNSELING CAUTION ON IRAQ.

We're not in the habit of offering advice to the leaders of the Democratic Party. And believe it or not, the leaders of the Democratic Party are not exactly in the habit of taking advice from us. Nevertheless, this one time, we're going to talk, and it would be to their benefit to listen.

If we could make just one suggestion to Nancy, Harry, Rahm, and the rest of the gang, it would be this: lie low over the next couple of weeks. You're in a no-win situation, and anything you say or do is likely only to make things worse. Do yourselves a favor and shut up. Be inconspicuous. Do whatever it takes not to call attention to yourselves.

Now, we know this counsel will be hard to follow, impossible perhaps. After all, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker are in town, claiming significant military and nominal political progress in Iraq. In response, the so-called "netroots" liberals are in their Tasmanian Devil mode, whirling and shrieking and demanding that "their" party take real action against the administration and use this opportunity to advance

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the cause of “peace” by moving aggressively to end the war in Iraq. Moreover, Congress itself is struggling mightily under its new, Democratic leadership, posting approval ratings not merely lower than President Bush’s, but lower than any Congress since pollsters began taking such measurements. Taken together, all of this suggests that the Democrats’ instinctive reaction will be to fight, to fight hard and noisily, to fight for their political lives. But this will be a mistake.

We are not certain if anyone has run through any of this for Nancy and Harry. But they and their supporters would do well to keep the following in mind as they plot their strategies for the upcoming political tussle over Iraq. In the 14-plus years of the Clinton and W. Bush presidencies, the leaders of the “loyal opposition” have fared extremely poorly. Indeed, with two exceptions, every previous leader of the opposition party in the House and the Senate since Bill Clinton took office in January, 1993, is now out of politics. And most of them left unceremoniously.

House Minority Leader Bob Michael (R) is gone and all but forgotten, having quit just as his party was making its historic power grab. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R) survived a mutiny within his own conference, but eventually became the first and highest profile casualty of Bill Clinton’s impeachment; today, he foolishly dreams of making some sort of a grand comeback. Senate Minority/Majority Leader Bob Dole (R) is a homemaker who also makes embarrassing commercials about certain parts of his anatomy that do not work well. Speaker of the House-designate Bob Livingston (R) apparently had exactly the opposite problem with the same part of his anatomy and will therefore be forever linked in the history books with the pornographer Larry Flynt, the man who took down the would-be Speaker of the House. Senate Minority/Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D) became the first sitting caucus leader in six bazillion years (give or take a few) to be defeated for reelection. And House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D) actually proved to be a less capable politician than John Kerry and thus has wisely gone into seclusion.

Of the two opposition leaders who remain in politics, both are “former” leaders, *former* Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert (R) and *former* Majority Leader Trent Lott (R). One of the two (Hastert) will be joining his colleagues in exile at the end of this Congress, while the other was forced from his leadership position by his own party after waxing nostalgic about the days of Jim Crow and is largely reviled by his party’s base for his unrelenting devotion to Congressional pork.

What nearly all of these men have in common, beside their onetime leadership roles, is that they learned the hard way that they don’t call the President of the United States “the most powerful man in the world” for nothing. The president has a platform unrivaled in politics from which to direct the nature and scope of the national debate, which, of course, is why Teddy Roosevelt dubbed it the “bully pulpit.” And those institutional advantages are amplified immeasurably when the president in question is politically talented, charismatic, and likable. Successfully challenging a gifted president requires a level of skill and magnetism that few politicians possess. And challenging such a president without those skills virtually ensures political death.

It’s easy to forget President Bush’s political skills, given his two-plus years of Nixonian approval ratings. But it would be a mistake to overlook them entirely. There was a time when his political acumen was widely acknowledged – at least by serious people. Indeed, six-and-a-half years ago, just after President Bush was inaugurated and months before 9/11 changed his presidency forever, we warned Democrats that dealing with him would be an exceptionally difficult and thankless task. We cautioned that the experiences of Speaker Gingrich, the *second* most talented politician of his generation, should give Democratic leaders pause. If Newt could be consistently and mercilessly beaten and embarrassed by Bill Clinton, then relative amateurs like Daschle and Gephardt could expect the same at the hands of George W. Bush. And we were right.

The good news for today's Democrats is that for more than two years now, President Bush has been his own worst enemy, failing to use the skills that won him the Oval Office twice and allowing Iraq to define his presidency, rather than using his bully pulpit to define the war. The bad news for Democrats is that Bush, at long last, appears to be coming out of his funk. The even worse news for the Democrats is that their leaders today make even the hapless Daschle and Gephardt look like political savants.

Bush's rebirth appears to us to be related to two developments, one obvious and the other considerably less so. The obvious development, naturally, is the turn of events in Iraq. We don't want to play "psychoanalyze-the-president" here, but there can be little doubt that Bush's mood today is radically different than his mood at this point last year. His confidence – the oft-discussed and much-maligned swagger – appears to have returned as the surge has progressed and shown positive results. Bush has always had the look and sound of a man who knows that he is doing what is right morally. But now he also appears to believe that he is doing what is right strategically and tactically. And his public image reflects that. One need look no further than Bush's trip to Iraq last week to find evidence that the old President Bush has begun to re-emerge, the man confident in his judgment and confident in the support of those directly affected by his decisions (not the least of whom are the troops in the field).

The second, less obvious development that has impelled this rebirth was the resignation a few weeks back of the President's most trusted advisor and political strategist, Karl Rove. Though this may seem counterintuitive, we can't help but believe that Rove's continued presence at the White House complicated the President's job and actually distracted him from his larger responsibilities with regard to Iraq and the broader war on terror.

There can be little question that Rove helped President Bush immensely. But at the same time, Rove tended to obsess about the Bush presidency's legacy and to focus on the day-to-day political tactics he believed

were necessary to secure that legacy. In this sense, Rove was much more like Bill Clinton than his own client/boss. Clinton, you may recall, was also fixated on his legacy and spent the overwhelming part of his presidency consumed with retail politics. And though this may have assured that he'll be remembered as an immeasurably talented politician, it also assured that he will be remembered for little else.

Bush, by contrast to both his predecessor and his chief advisor, has always proclaimed a disdain for "small ball" and a correlated affection for and propensity for grander and more historically significant efforts. Freed from Rove's encouragement and preoccupations, President Bush is able once again to play "big ball," to focus his time and energy on those efforts that are most important to the nation as a whole, as opposed to those that matter most from a personal or partisan standpoint. Chief among these efforts, of course, is the war on terror, in all its component parts, including both the war in Iraq and the intention either to effect regime change in Iran or to eliminate the current Iranian regime's nascent nuclear weapons program.

The ultimate irony here is that now that he has been liberated from the obsession with legacy, President Bush may actually be back on course to accomplish those things that would, in fact, secure for him a lasting and overwhelmingly positive place in the history books.

As for the Democrats, it's hard for us even to imagine a political party more confident yet so precariously perched. To use the obvious metaphor here, the Democrats climbed way out on a limb on Iraq over the last year-and-a-half, but especially since the beginning of the surge. And over the past couple of weeks, they've started sawing off that limb behind them. The Democratic Party as a whole staked its reputation, such as it is, and its political future on defeat in Iraq. Congressman James Clyburn, the third-ranking Democrat in the House, infamously admitted as much this summer, when he noted that a positive report from General Petraeus this month would be "a big problem for us."

Well, Petraeus has indeed delivered a largely positive report. And as Clyburn prophesied, that has created a big problem for the Democrats. The question now is what do they do next?

As we suggested at the top of this piece, what they should do, politically speaking, is absolutely nothing. They should be respectful of General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker and thank them for their service. They should ask pointed yet productive questions of the two at the various Congressional hearings. And they should do nothing else. This is the Democrats' only hope of surviving this week's events with their collective dignity and political aspirations still intact.

It's true that keeping quiet and being respectful of Petraeus would antagonize the aggressively anti-war denizens of the far-left netroots. But what doesn't antagonize them? They are congenitally unhappy. They are bound to be antagonized again sometime in the near future, so whether or not they're appeased now will mean very little in the long run.

That said, actually appeasing the netroots may well have a long-term negative effect on the Democratic Party's standing with the rest of the electorate. Almost from Day One, the hard-core anti-warriors have misread the public's sentiment on the war, believing that the nation's misgivings about Iraq mirrored their own. In fact, the public has always shown a desire to see the war won and soured on it only when victory appeared elusive. The Democrats as a whole have fallen into the same pattern as the anti-warriors of late, misunderstanding the public's reticence with regard to Iraq. And this, more than anything else, is why General Petraeus's high profile and largely positive testimony this week presents Democrats with a very serious and very problematical challenge.

Recent public opinion surveys show that the public is largely optimistic about the surge's potential for success. A CBS News/*New York Times* poll released over the weekend shows that the percentage of people who believe that the surge is working and improving the situation in Iraq has almost doubled since July (19% to 35%), while the percentage of those who believe the surge is making conditions worse has been

almost halved (20% to 12%). For the Democrats to discount these numbers and to continue to declare the surge a failure, even as the military and the public grow more optimistic, would be courting political suicide. To return to our tired metaphor, it would be to accelerate the pace of the sawing on the limb on which they sit, just above the abyss.

Up until now, the Democrats have always been able to claim that their anti-war inclinations have their roots in a deep concern for the nation's well being and a belief that the war in Iraq is detrimental to national security. But in the face of increased optimism and reports from some erstwhile fanatical anti-war Congressional Democrats that conditions in Iraq are indeed improving, continued insistence on surrender and withdrawal could permanently affect the electorate's perceptions of the party and its motives. As things stand today, the Democrats have an overwhelming advantage in public opinion polls with unaffiliated or independent voters. But fourteen months is an interminably long time in politics, and if the Democrats allow the public to come to the conclusion that their opposition to the war is less than idealistic and is instead based principally on crass domestic political calculations, then that advantage could shrink, perhaps disappearing entirely by Election Day.

Now, we understand that standing up to the left wing of the party would be exceptionally difficult for Nancy, Harry, and the rest, even if "standing up" means simply keeping quiet. As *National Review's* Byron York noted yesterday, "MoveOn simply has too much fundraising clout – and a fear-inducing inclination to attack Democrats who stray from the MoveOn line – for many in the party to take it on." But though there is danger in crossing MoveOn, DailyKos, and the rest of the netroots, there is, we believe, even greater danger in crossing General Petraeus, a reinvigorated President Bush, and a public that may want the Iraq war to be over, but wants for it to end with an American victory.

Our inclination is that most Democrats understand this, which is to say that they will ultimately roll over once again and give President Bush whatever he wants for Iraq. What remains to be seen, however, is

whether the party's Congressional leaders are smart enough to heed the lessons of recent history and, if they are not, how loudly, futilely, and damagingly they declare their ignorance.

ELITE CULTURE AND ITS TREASURED ASSUMPTIONS.

Though we have yet to read it, we have a sneaking suspicion that the new book by Stuart Taylor, Jr. and KC Johnson, *Until Proven Innocent*, could be one of the most interesting and insightful volumes published this year. The book deals with the Duke non-rape case and specifically with the failure of America's elite institutions to treat the case in an appropriate manner given their privileged status. As the inimitable Abigail Thernstrom put it in her *Wall Street Journal* review of the book:

“Until Proven Innocent” is a stunning book. It recounts the Duke lacrosse case in fascinating detail and offers, along the way, a damning portrait of the institutions – legal, educational and journalistic – that do so much to shape contemporary American culture. Messrs. Taylor and Johnson make it clear that the Duke affair – the rabid prosecution, the skewed commentary, the distorted media storyline – was not some odd, outlier incident but the product of an elite culture's most treasured assumptions about American life, not least about America's supposed racial divide.

We are mildly interested in the specifics of the Duke case, but what intrigues us more is the role that the “elite culture's most treasured assumptions about American life” play in the broader formation of the civic culture. We have long believed and have long argued that the most pernicious effect of the liberal media bias, for example, is not that it causes journalists to distort the news intentionally, but that the media's shared “liberal assumptions” tend to trigger “group think,” which prevents its members from examining news stories from any perspective than that which

supports their own predetermined conclusions. It's not that the media intentionally skews news coverage to damage conservatives and conservative causes. For the most part, journalists are sincere in the efforts to maintain objectivity. It's just that the “assumptions about American life” that underlie this purported objectivity are not only nearly universal among the media but that they are also nearly universally wrong.

In addition to the Duke case, two recent stories, both of which broke last week, help to illustrate this point. Though one cannot argue that the mainstream media did not cover these two stories, one can (and should) argue that it did not cover them particularly well. The media's collective presumptions about the respective stories, about the people involved, and about the background events that preceded both precluded its members from asking the appropriate questions and seeking the deeper, more perceptive and helpful answers.

The first of the two stories was that involving fugitive Democratic fund-raiser and FOH (Friend of Hillary) Norman Hsu. As we all know by now, Hsu was on the lam for 15 years, but somehow managed to raise a great deal of money for next year's Democratic presidential hopefuls, most of it going to Mrs. Bill Clinton. Hsu donated a significant amount of money himself and also “bundled” a great deal more, much of it purportedly coming from individuals and families with no history of political activism and without the financial means to make such generous contributions. Oh, and by the way, Hsu is an American of Chinese ancestry.

If all of this sounds familiar, that's because it is. These are precisely the same type of crimes that sparked the investigation into the fund-raising efforts of the 1996 Clinton-Gore re-election campaign, an investigation that led eventually to the disclosure of all sorts of irregularities in that campaign's quest for cash, many of which were directly perpetrated by some of the Democratic party's most prominent and powerful officials (e.g. Commerce Secretary and former DNC chairman Ron Brown, DNC finance chairman and future party chairman Terry McAuliffe, Vice President Al Gore).

As you may recall, it turned out that much of the illegal fundraising cash was donated to the Clinton campaign by ethnic Chinese, for example the billionaire Riady family of Indonesia. Some of the money came from the Chinese government itself or from agents and front operations representing the Chinese government and was intended, among other things, to grease the skids for the Chinese to acquire dual-use and military technology under the guise of commercial trade. And as a handful of dedicated investigative reporters (most notably the *Washington Times*' Bill Gertz) discovered, the Chinese effort was enormously successful, by almost any measure.

The problem with the mainstream coverage of the current Clinton fund-raising scandal is that it has been shockingly superficial. Most of the coverage has treated this as a campaign finance issue and nothing else, much as it did in 1996. This narrow focus, which addresses illegality of the contributions exclusively, completely misses the point, as it presumes that this episode is no different than any other instances of illegal fundraising. The potentially nefarious injection of foreign cash into the American system and the purposes of such an injection have been completely ignored.

A handful of reporters have moved beyond this stock fund-raising tale and have posed some questions about the origin of the funds and for which Hsu served as a conduit. But even this coverage has remained largely cursory.

To the best of our knowledge, no one in the mainstream press has asked what this cash was intended to buy (*quid pro quo*) or why Hillary in particular was the target of this attempt to manipulate the campaign finance system. The reason these questions aren't asked, of course, is that they violate the mainstream press's assumptions about America, about the Democratic Party, and specifically about Bill and Hillary Clinton.

To ask those questions would be to question the character of the likely Democratic presidential nominee and thus to question the character of the party that would nominate her. In the media's

narrative, it's the Republicans who are corrupt, not the Democrats, and it is the GOP that will do whatever it has to in order to win elections, even if that means nominating a known criminal.

For the record, we do not think that Mrs. Clinton offered Hsu or anyone else anything in return for these contributions. We don't think that she intentionally broke any laws or did anything untoward at all to generate these specific donations. But that is largely beside the point, because her husband did.

Indeed, we would be unsurprised to learn the reason that Mrs. Clinton was targeted by those who back Hsu is because Mr. Clinton before her was such an accommodating partner. We guess that Hsu's patrons, like the overwhelming majority of Democratic voters, want nothing more to have the chance to relive the halcyon days of the 1990s.

Not that we expect the mainstream media to tell us this.

The second story that, we believe, has received insufficient coverage because of the threat it poses to the "elite culture's most treasured assumptions" is the story of the terrorism busts in Germany and Denmark. Again, the mainstream media has done a reasonable job of presenting the basic facts of this case. But again, they have missed the broader issues at play by insisting on treating these counter-terrorism successes as predictable responses to unsurprising occurrences rather than as alarming indications that something very new and very dangerous is in the offing.

To recognize the latter case would be to get sucked into a call for stronger anti-terrorism measures, which would in turn lead to a tacit recognition that past measures have been justified by the circumstances rather than examples of overreach by a war mongering president who is always on the alert for an excuse to usher in a fascist, police state.

For example, there has been precious little attention paid to the fact that the "surveillance" that made possible the capture of the terrorists in Germany

– and thus prevented a significant loss of life – is the very type of surveillance that folks like the ACLU and many of the leaders of the Democratic Party would deny the Bush administration. The initial identification of two of the plotters in Germany came from emails and phone calls intercepted by American intelligence agencies under the type of program that many in the so-called “civil libertarian” community would like to see outlawed.

In Denmark, the arrest of eight suspected terrorist plotters came at almost precisely the same time that another group of alleged terrorists was standing trial for a similar plot broken up in September of last year. That plot, which is alleged to have taken place in the city of Odense, was short-circuited principally because of evidence presented to law enforcement officials by an informant who was part of the community from which the other plotters came.

Now few people on the American left openly oppose the concept of using such informants, though many would consider them traitors to “their people.” But many vehemently oppose some of the most common methods for recruiting such informants, which includes “aggressive interrogations,” the deliberate use of the legal system to compromise individuals of dubious character as a way of coercing them into acting as informants, and conducting “neighborhood interviews” for the purpose of finding potential informants. This latter ploy was used extensively in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, much to the dismay of the ACLU types, who were quick to charge that the Bush administration was guilty of mass harassment of American Muslims.

In the end, the left’s “treasured assumptions” are likely to be tarnished by even more treasured truths concerning human nature and the human condition.

One would think that in this age of rapidly shrinking newspaper readership and equally diminishing network news consumption someone, somewhere would catch onto the fact that news consumers are tired of getting their information from a small collection of individuals all of whom think alike and share the same “treasured assumptions about American life.” The rise of alternative media – from talk radio to Fox News to Matt Drudge and the bloggers – is, in large part, a reaction to the “group think” fostered by liberal elite institutions.

Many liberals are appalled by alternative media and seek its regulation (through the return of the Fairness Doctrine and the like), not because it’s a threat to the media in general or to objectivity, equality, and honesty in journalism, but because it is a threat to those treasured assumptions. Bloggers like KC Johnson helped blow the lid off of the Duke non-rape by exposing the flaws in the prosecution’s case and the related flaws in the media coverage of that case. The greatest fear of many of those in the mainstream media is that others like Johnson will likewise expose the flaws in other stories currently presented only from the perspective of liberal elites.

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