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THEY SAID IT

Dear Abby:

My husband is a liar and a cheat. He has cheated on me from the beginning, and, when I confront him, he denies everything. What's worse, everyone knows that he cheats on me. It is so humiliating. Also, since he lost his job seven years ago, he hasn't even looked for a new one. All he does all day is smoke cigars, cruise around and shoot the bull with his buddies while I have to work to pay the bills. Since our daughter left home he doesn't even pretend to like me and hints that I may be a lesbian. What should I do?

Signed,
Clueless

Dear Clueless:

Grow up and dump him. Good grief, woman. You don't need him anymore. You're a United States Senator from New York and a presidential candidate. Act like one.

--Internet/email joke

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ELECTABILITY OBSESSIVE DISORDER.

We guess this should go without saying, but technically speaking, neither one of us is a qualified mental health professional. We wonder sometimes if that fact might be a little too easy to forget, given that we have spent an inordinate amount of our time since 9/11 diagnosing and discussing the psychological disorders that have befallen the political left in the West. Recall that there was a time, roughly from the beginning of the Iraq war through the run-up to last year's midterm election, during which the phrase "the Democrats' descent into madness" was both the main theme of political discourse in this country and, quite possibly, the most oft used phrase in the pages of this newsletter.

And of course, we as much as anyone have noted and debated the effect on the Democratic Party of the condition known as Bush Derangement Syndrome (BDS), which was first identified roughly four-and-a-half years ago by the Harvard-trained psychiatrist and once chief resident of psychiatric medicine at Massachusetts General, Charles Krauthammer. As Krauthammer put it, BDS is "the acute onset of paranoia in otherwise normal people in reaction to the policies, the presidency – nay – the very existence of George W. Bush." BDS causes sufferers to fly into a rage at the mere mention of the President and to blame him for any and every unfavorable event that occurs anywhere in the world. It is a condition that today is both broadly recognized by political observers and broadly prevalent on the left.

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To hear many, if not most, elected Democrats and their supporter tell it, President Bush (who, you will remember, was *selected*, not elected) is the cause of global warming. And he is also the cause of global cooling. He causes hurricanes, and directs them toward majority-black cities. He caused deflation and he is causing inflation, particularly in the energy sector, so as to benefit his and Dick Cheney's buddies. He has inflamed the Arab Street while at the same time, he has suppressed the Arab Street through simulated drowning. And on and on it goes.

Just yesterday, in fact, Markos Moulitsas, the most-recognizable figure on the "netroots" left, suggested in the pages of *Newsweek*, that the Democrats should make George Bush and his unprecedented and paradoxical record of ineptitude mixed with omnipotence the central issues of the 2008 presidential campaign. "Kos" and the rest of the netroots types hate Bush so much, are so invested in the idea of Bush as the ultimate evil, are, in short, so addled by Bush Derangement Syndrome that it seems never to have occurred to any of them that neither Bush nor anyone else in or associated with his administration will have any connection whatsoever to the eventual Republican nominee or any role in the campaign. A mere technicality, we guess.

Over the last several weeks we have noticed the emergence – or re-emergence, more accurately – of a mental condition that may be more destructive to the Democratic Party than even BDS, but which has, up until now, been largely overlooked. We're not entirely sure what to call this condition, but we do know that there is a classic psychologically obsessive component to it. Unhealthy obsessions, generally speaking, are defined not so much by constant worry, but by constant worry about an inappropriate or pointless subjects. In other words, a psychological obsession is not anxiety about important or relevant things, but about things that are immaterial or uncontrollable.

In politics then, constant worrying about which candidate best represents the values of the party, or which candidate appears most likely to implement those values once elected, or which candidate best understands his party's legacy and ideology, would

not constitute an obsession, given that those are not merely important and relevant concerns, but the core concerns in a primary/nominating process. By contrast, relentless hand-wringing and fretting about which candidate best meets the vague, poorly defined, and frankly unknowable and capricious definition of, say, "electability" may very well be obsessive.

Specifically, while it may be extraordinarily tiresome to hear the Republican presidential wannabes repeatedly and unremittingly compare themselves to Reagan and claim the "mantle of Reagan," such jockeying is not exactly unusual. In the years since his departure from the public stage, Reagan has become the "ideal type" of a conservative leader, in much the same way that JFK became the ideal type of the modern liberal for Democrats some years back. The Republicans' constant references to and invocation of Reagan are merely each candidate's attempt to convince voters that he is the "true" conservative and thus the man most deserving of their primary support. Annoying? Yes. Obsessive? Not really.

At the same time, on the other side of the political divide, there is no debate over who is the true liberal, the real "progressive." There has been some back-and-forth jawing about whether it was acceptable to have supported the invasion of Iraq, but that conversation, like so much else in this contest, has been entirely superficial. Iraq is merely a cudgel with which to beat opponents. The issue is, in no way, representative of a worldview or a national security belief system. There has been no embrace of isolationist sentiment or declaration of pacifism, no peacenik adoption of a non-violent foreign policy. Even Barack Obama, the anti-Iraq-warrior among the frontrunners, has declared that he would happily bomb the living hell out of Pakistan, a sovereign nation and ostensible ally, if it would help rid the world of Islamic terrorists.

The only questions being asked by Democratic big shots, Democratic voters, and liberal journalists are "can Hillary win?" and, if not, "who can?" That's it. Obama, for example, may want voters to believe that he represents a new, sanguine liberalism, but in practice, he is merely the anti-Hillary.

For months now, ever since it became evident that Mrs. Clinton is the clear and unchallenged frontrunner, Democratic operatives and supporters have done almost nothing but fixate on her weaknesses and on the potential she has to lose, rather than win the general election. She's too mean. She's too cold. She's not Bill. Her negatives are too high. She is fragile and bruises easily. She doesn't excite voters. She carries too much baggage. Voters will worry about the "co-presidency." She's too polarizing. She's a woman. She's an unpleasant woman. *Et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum.*

Hillary is a polished public performer. Her husband and chief advisor is unquestionably the most talented and most effective politician of his generation. She has a political operation that is unmatched and loaded with long-time and highly successful professionals. She raises money like nobody's business. And she has nearly universal name recognition. And, more to the point, she handily defeats all potential Republican nominees in head-to-head polling. Yet, all that many Democrats and their allies can do is fret about how vulnerable she is. All politicians are vulnerable. That's the nature of the game. Still, today's Democrats seem determined to obsess about her particular vulnerability.

As we suggested above, this is not the first time this obsession with "electability" has affected the Democratic Party and its choice of candidates. Indeed, in the last presidential contest, Democrats spent months and months agonizing about the fact that the candidate who was the most electric, most intense, and most charismatic was also the candidate who was the easiest to caricature and thus the most likely to be soundly defeated by the nasty Republican spin machine. And so after flirting with and obsessing over Howard Dean for most of 2003, the Democrats eventually rejected him and opted for a more "electable" candidate, John Kerry, openly conceding that his electability set him apart from Dean. And we all recall how well that turned out.

Kerry and his defenders would undoubtedly claim that he was, in fact, electable and that he came only a few million ballots from winning the popular vote and

only one state (Ohio) from winning the White House. Maybe. But we're not all that sure. In our opinion, Kerry's showing in 2004 was the absolute best that the Massachusetts Senator could have done, under any circumstances and in any campaign. He had so many advantages, so much wind at his back, and still he couldn't get it done. Kerry was, is, and ever shall be a loser. He took what was clearly the most favorable political climate for the upset of an incumbent since Reagan beat Carter and somehow managed to screw it up. Most pollsters noted early on that it was Kerry's race to lose, and lose it he did. Democrats rejected Dean, fearing that he was unelectable. They opted instead for Kerry, never stopping to consider the fact that he was unlikable and unpleasant, to put it mildly.

Now, for the record, we're not saying that Dean could have won had he been nominated. Indeed, it is quite likely that he would have been crushed far worse than Kerry was. But as we noted just before the Iowa Caucuses that year, though Dean was far from a sure thing, at least he had the potential to win. By contrast, all of the other candidates that year, Kerry included, were, in fact, sure losers.

So rather than learn from their mistakes, many within the Democratic establishment seem intent on repeating them, only worse. In 2004, Democrats rejected a radical and embraced a more moderate candidate. Though Kerry was a dud, at the very least he was an experienced and long-serving Senator who was calmer, more composed, and far less likely to energize and aggravate the Republican base. This time, the migration could move in the opposite direction.

Whatever else she is, Mrs. Clinton is a realist. She knows that neither the anti-internationalism nor the economics of the hard left makes any sense. And she knows that it would be next to impossible to win an election – even one that appears as favorably inclined toward the Democrats as next year's – while peddling surrender and radical redistributionism. Mrs. Clinton promises a return to the relative international serenity and economic expansion that marked her husband's presidency. The fact that she'll be unable to deliver

either is beside the point. All politicians promise what they can't deliver. But what Mrs. Clinton can deliver is the experience of eight years in the White House (and 12 years as the spouse of the chief executive of the state of Arkansas), the experience of nearly eight years in the Senate, and a political machine that is loaded with more talented, effective, and ruthless political operatives, strategists, fundraisers, and potential cabinet members than any other campaign this year or in any previous year in memory.

Does any of this mean that Hillary will win the general election? Not necessarily. But right now the smart money says she can and she will. Like Dean before her, at least she has a chance, and a good one at that. All of the hype notwithstanding, that's more than can be said about any of the other Democratic wannabes.

For example, the longer this campaign drags on, the clearer it becomes that Barack Obama is smart, charismatic, and ultimately unprepared to be the President of the United States. Obama knows he is charismatic and appears to have decided to pin his political career on that attribute alone. His policy positions are superficial and incoherent, to say the least. His rhetoric is both simplistic and contradicted by his actions. He is a politician full of promise and yet so aware of that promise as to be unwilling or unable to develop it into a full-blown political persona. As the screenwriter, novelist, and political commentator Roger L. Simon put it this weekend, Obama comes off increasingly "like a late night infomercial host – slightly charming, slightly unctuous, factually meaningless. Ready for the Presidency? Don't be silly."

Obama is also quite clearly in over his head when it comes to playing political hardball, as he demonstrated so amply with his weak and oafish response to reports over the weekend that the Clinton campaign has scandalous information about him. If Obama was unaware not only that the Clintons play hard ball, but that they play it better and more ruthlessly than anyone else, then he is hardly a smart or well prepared politician. And more to the point, he's a politician who would get beaten badly if he carries the Democratic banner.

As for the rest of the Democratic field, "are you serious?" is the only question that comes to mind. John Edwards? Really? This guy was almost certainly chosen to be John Kerry's running mate in 2004 because he was the only politician in the nation who could make Kerry look likable by comparison. He's smarmy. He's sanctimonious. And he's absolutely shameless. Edwards' supporters think that he is a cross between Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, the last two Democrats to win the presidency. And though that may be true, he embodies the worst of both men; he is an unserious, self-absorbed, self-righteous, and yet completely clueless about the actual operation of government and details of public policy. That Edwards is among the "top tier" Democratic candidates is evidence not of the effectiveness of his campaign, but of the dearth of affable, qualified Democrats willing to run for the presidency.

What is truly amazing and, frankly, incomprehensible, is that in spite of all of this, the Democratic establishment continues to fret openly and obsessively about *Hillary's* "electability." We have been saying for months now that Hillary is inevitable, that she is a shoe-in for the nomination and possibly the presidency. Our problem is that we once again failed to account for her party's neurotic obsession with the idea of electability. Over the past few weeks, Hillary's candidacy has been bruised to the point where it actually appears vulnerable. Yet this bruising is the result not of the emergence of another candidate or the refutation of her policy positions, but exclusively because of worries about electability. We hate to be so cavalier about this, but that's just nuts.

In 2004, establishment Democrats convinced voters to reject Dean and to cast their collective lot with someone more electable. And they lost. We have no brief to make for Hillary, whom we clearly find personally and politically odious. But if Democrats are truly looking for a political winner, then she is by far the best they have. The only question now is whether they're smart enough and sane enough to figure that out.

THE TWILIGHT OF LIBERALISM.

Ever since Al Gore invented global warming, liberals have been fretting over the possible, pending disappearance of numerous species, from frogs to polar bears, and speculating on the impact this would have on the future of mankind. We have to admit that this is an interesting endeavor. So this week we thought we would join in the fun by posing the following question: “If the population of left wing intellectuals disappears from the face of the earth can liberals be far behind?”

The knee jerk answer to this query is as follows. “That’s nonsense. Intellectuals are like hippopotamuses. No one would miss them if they were gone. They serve no important purpose. They simply stir up the mud in the river and yawn a lot. Moreover, even if these folks were to disappear, liberalism has enough intellectual capital already banked to last an eternity. Why, it has as rich a storehouse of highbrow thought behind it as any ideology in the history of mankind. There’s Voltaire and Rousseau, Robespierre and Danton, Marx and Engels, Prudhon and LaSalle, Feuerbach and Stirner, Shelley and Byron, Bentham and Mill, Bernstein and Sorel, Kropotkin and Gramsci, Owen and Fourier, Nietzsche and Kant, Russell and Sartre, Derrida and Foucault. So what difference does it make if today’s left wing intellectuals are unimaginative and unexciting. Who needs them? Right?”

To which we would answer, “well, maybe.” But the cold hard truth is that while these and other renowned leftist icons of bygone days produced some imaginative and even brilliant works, a large percentage of their collective output was pure dreck. And given the educational system in America today, from K to B.A., most ordinary Americans and politicians alike are unable to tell the difference. Moreover, even much of the good stuff in the liberal intellectual bank is sadly outdated when considered in light of the problems facing modern day America.

What, for example, do the concerns that Shelley and Owen had for the underclass in 19th century England have to do with “poor” Americans today, most of whom don’t suffer from lack of food but from obesity? What do Marx’s theories on the tension between capital and labor have to do with outsourcing,

NAFTA, globalization? Has any left-wing icon of any era ever said anything at all that would provide useful guidance on the subject of what to do about Islamic terrorism, or declining birth rates among the sons and daughters of the Western Enlightenment, or the emergence of a radical, restless, and unassimilated immigrant proletariat?

Enter the left wing intellectual. It is his or her crucial role to identify and separate the “good” leftist dogma from the bad, the useful from the useless, the outdated from the relevant, and to add new and vibrant ideas that are consistent with the underlying philosophy of the old ones. An ideological movement that does not include men and women who are capable of this task is unlikely to survive. Individuals will continue to claim membership in the movement, but each will increasingly chart his or her own course, which means that the entirety will lack ideological clarity as well as historical justifications for its premises and policy positions.

Anyone who is paying attention to the current contest among Democrats for the honor of representing the party in the upcoming presidential race can see that Mrs. Clinton and her male competitors are all intellectually and ideologically confused. Not only do they “flip-flop” repeatedly, but their positions, even when finalized, hardly reflect any of the accumulated wisdom of left wing thought and experience over the past 200-plus years. Instead, they appear to be completely fabricated on the spot in response to what their pollsters tell them voters wish to hear. This isn’t necessarily bad politics, but turning the ideological compass over to the canaille is the beginning of the end of liberalism as a political ideology.

This is no secret, of course. Indeed, many highly respected leaders of the Democrat Party have expressed public concern about it over the past several years and proposed a number of remedies. We have reported on this circumstance quite often in these pages, including the following paragraphs written over two and a half years ago.

[Lately] we have noticed that two premises keep popping up in their [the Democrats’] public pronouncements. The first and most prominent of these is that Democrats feel

that they need “new ideas” and “new issues” with which to capture the imagination of the American people. The second is that Democrats feel that they need to study and emulate the Republican rise to power.

These two themes came together last week with the announcement of an ambitious plan under which, according to *The Washington Post*, “80 wealthy liberals have pledged to contribute \$1 million or more apiece to fund a network of think tanks and advocacy groups to compete with the potent conservative infrastructure built up over the past three decades.” According to the *Post*, the purpose of these groups would be to generate “new ideas and communication strategies” . . .

In fact, plotting ways to put the Democratic Party back on a rational ideological course has become the popular new parlor game among the Party’s strategists since its devastating loss at the polls last November. New web sites are springing up for this purpose, including one at www.principlesproject.com, specifically designed, according to *The Washington Post*, to allow “progressives” to participate in an online convention designed to define and promote what Democrats believe.”

In addition, a new “think tank” has been established called the Center for American Progress, run by John Podesta and funded in large part by George Soros. Its first two goals are to develop a “long-term vision of a progressive America” and to provide “a forum to generate new progressive ideas and policy proposals.”

Now we are not in a position to say whether these efforts have produced their intended result. But an op-ed piece that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* last week provided considerable evidence that they have not. The subject of the article was the “hatred” for the President of the United States that the author has encountered among “the intellectual class” and the “pride” that these intellectuals seem to take in this hatred, “openly endorsing it as a virtue and enthusiastically proclaiming that their hatred is not only a rational response to the president and his

administration but a mark of good moral hygiene.” The piece was written by Peter Berkowitz, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and was titled, “The Insanity of Bush Hatred.”

Now “hatred” is a strong word. Berkowitz could have used dislike, disdain, scorn, or even contempt. But he didn’t. He used what is arguably the strongest commonly used term of animosity in the English language, worse even than loathing, which is a somewhat more passive emotion. Hatred carries with it an implied threat of violence, or at least a feeling that violence if inflicted would be deserved.

What, one wonders, has President Bush done to earn such animosity from “progressive intellectuals,” men and women who are highly educated by today’s standards, who earn their livelihood and justify their existence by the supposed keenness of their thoughts, who have received training in the ancient art of sifting through information to obtain truth, who call themselves “teacher,” one of mankind’s most noble titles, shared by the likes of Aristotle and Christ.

In the article, Berkowitz notes that at a dinner he once hosted in Washington for “several distinguished progressive scholars, journalists, and policy analysts,” one individual responded to his questioning of the wisdom of this hatred, “in a loud, seething, in-your-face voice” and to the apparent approval of the rest of the audience, with the following question: “What’s irrational about hating George W. Bush?”

The answer to this question that Berkowitz didn’t think to give, but one that even the simplest intellectual should be able to figure out, is that George Bush is a symptom of whatever is bothering these people, not the cause. We used to say this about the animosity that many conservatives felt toward Bill Clinton, that he was a consequence of America’s moral sloth not the cause. Hating an individual president is like hating the fever instead of the flu. It is counterproductive, foolish. It draws attention away from the search for a cure. It says more about the childish intellect of the hater than the character of the president.

If these people want to deal in hatred, these professional, political ideologues whose professed collective desire is promote left-wing thoughts and

actions, they should be selling it to the public, not wallowing in it themselves. They are smoking their own dope, which conventional wisdom teaches is very bad business. Indeed, if these are the kinds of “intellectuals” upon which the future of liberalism rests, we would argue, for the all of the reasons listed above, that the “progressive movement” is in very deep trouble

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the impetus for Berkowitz’s article was his recent participation in a panel of presumably notable “progressives,” which was assembled at Princeton “to debate the ideas of Princeton Professor and *American Prospect* editor Paul Starr’s excellent new book, *Freedom’s Power: The True Force of Liberalism*.”

Now neither of us here at “The Political Forum” has read this tome, nor will we. But we have read a number of reviews of it and in the process discovered that this is one of a seeming endless stream of recent books by noted “progressives,” all purporting to provide the left with some sort of coherent intellectual blueprint for the future.

This list of books includes, but is not limited to, Al Gore’s *The Assault on Reason*, E. J. Dionne Jr.’s *Liberalism for a New Century*, Todd Gitlin’s *The Bulldozer and the Big Tent: Blind Republicans, Lame Democrats, and the Recovery of American Ideals*, Eric Alterman’s *Why We’re Liberals: A Political Handbook for Post-Bush America*, and Paul Krugman’s *The Conscience of a Liberal*.

Once again, we have not read any of these books, nor will we. But, as with Starr’s work, we have read *about* each of them and have concluded that all fall short

of the mission. Why? Well, because the liberalism that these “progressives intellectuals” defend is out of sync with the times. It emerged and developed during different eras for use against different problems than those that trouble the United States today.

Ask Hillary. Ask Barack. Ask any of the Democratic candidates who are trying to use yesterday’s liberal weapons in today’s political battles over such things as the threat of Islamic terrorism, the economic complications of globalization, uncontrolled immigration, an aging population, the existence of huge cankers of both public and private debt, environmental devastation, global competition from the likes of China and India for scarce natural resources, nuclear proliferation among third world countries, social decay, widespread corruption, and incessant demands by the public for license instead of freedom.

These problems are not necessarily outside the purview of “progressive” politics. But it seems highly unlikely that the current crop of left-wing intellectuals is up to the task of developing a workable blueprint for action. In the meantime, Mrs. Clinton et al. will just have to rely on a little bailing wire and elbow grease, mixed in with large doses of hatred and Republican incompetence. And perhaps the U.S. Post Office could begin preparing a commemorative stamp series honoring liberal intellectuals, beginning with Voltaire and ending with Bill Maher.

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