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THEY SAID IT

There was a media kerfuffle the other day because at some GOP event an audience member referred to Senator Clinton as a “bitch” and John McCain was deemed not to have distanced himself sufficiently from it. Totally phony controversy: In private, Hillary’s crowd liked the way it plays into her image as a tough stand-up broad. And, yes, she is tough. A while back, Elizabeth Edwards had the temerity to venture that she thought her life was happier than Hillary’s. And within days the Clinton gang had jumped her in a dark alley, taken the tire iron to her kneecaps, and forced her into a glassy-eyed public recantation of her *lesé-majesté*. If you’re looking for someone to get tough with Elizabeth Edwards, or RINO senators, or White House travel-office flunkies, Hillary’s your gal.

Mark Steyn, “No Iron Lady,” *National Review Online*, November 25, 2007.

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RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT DURING “HARD TIMES.”

As you have certainly noticed, each candidate in the presidential sweepstakes is currently running on a platform that prominently features a list of initiatives that, if elected, he or she would pursue to make things better. On the other side of the rope line are voters who, most polls show, are much less interested in these promises of additional good things to come than they are in choosing the candidate who is least likely to screw things up.

This isn’t 1932 when voters wanted someone who would reverse the economic collapse. And it isn’t 1980, when “malaise” gripped the nation and voters were looking for someone to make them feel better. This is 2007 and things are pretty darn good for most Americans. And whether voters know it or not, in their heart of hearts most of them are simply looking for someone who will keep it that way, the way they believe that they, as Americans, have a right to have it.

Like a child who would love to receive a pony for Christmas but would be happy with the latest computer game, most Americans would be thrilled with a host of new government handouts, but would be satisfied if the next president would just protect their current standard of living; continue the on-going progress in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; keep interest rates, inflation, and unemployment close to current levels; keep the world free from the threat of a nuclear Iran without having to go to war; keep the social safety net strong and reasonably generous; continue to make a good faith effort to get a handle on the immigration problem; continue to keep the nation safe from another major terrorist attack; and keep the nation militarily secure.

When viewed from this perspective, Mrs. Clinton's well-deserved reputation as a sleazy, unprincipled, unlikable harridan is not as damaging as it might be under other circumstances. Voters recognize that keeping America on top of the heap is a tough job in this day and age and could be forgiven for believing that a sleazy, unprincipled, unlikable harridan might be just the right person to send into the fray. Which, in case you haven't noticed, is exactly the pitch the lady is just beginning to make. She promises an enticing array of new good things, like all the rest, but her day-to-day message is increasingly about competence, experience, and, most of all, grit.

Now if everything is hunky dory by November 2008, voters may focus on the other candidates' promises of "good times to come," like Waylon and Willie's "good hearted woman," but we doubt that that will be the case. More importantly, we doubt that Mrs. Clinton and her supporters in the liberal media will allow the public to believe that that is the case, even if it is.

Indeed, by the time the Democratic convention rolls around next summer, and Mrs. Clinton graciously accepts her party's nomination, our guess is that her political machine and the liberal media will have done everything in their collective power to convince the public that this nation is in very deep trouble, that the world as they know it is under siege, threatened in fact, and that only the "Iron Lady" from New York via Arkansas can preserve the status quo, can save the day, so to speak.

If we're right, this is more than an election story. It is a story about an upcoming, well organized, political assault on consumer sentiment, on the value of the dollar, on the public's attitude toward the war in Iraq, and on the credibility of America's guarantee of continued support to allies such as Taiwan, Israel and Pakistan. It's a story about an election being held at a time when Americans are living better than any people in the history of the entire world have ever lived, but are being told by the nation's majority party and the mainstream press that it is all an illusion, that they live in a deeply troubled nation that is on the wrong track,

headed rapidly downhill, in desperate need of help from someone who knows how to wield power and is not afraid to do so.

It is possible, of course, that things will be so good in the coming months that the American people will recognize this ploy as a crock. But any weakness in any sector will be used to feed their insecurities and in doing so undermine voter confidence. Such is life in an election year when times are good.

MUCH ADO ABOUT ANNAPOLIS.

We really hate to begin an article with a cliché. But if there is any subject that just screams out for a tired old chestnut, it's the thriller in Annapolis. So here goes: If we had a dime for every time that an American president brought the Israelis, Palestinians, and other Arabs together under the guise of "peace" talks but failed to produce any positive results, we'd be sitting on the beach in Hawaii in our bathing suits drinking one of those tasty concoctions featuring a tiny little umbrella rather than sitting in our pajamas in our basements drinking branch water and trying to figure out what in the world possessed the Bush crowd to initiate yet another round of Middle East "peace talks."

Peace talks are good in theory, but in practice, they are hopeless at best, and more often than not, deadly, especially for the Israelis. From the Rogers Plan to the Camp David Accords; from the Reagan Plan to Oslo; from the Hebron Agreement to the Wye River Accord; from Sharm el-Sheik back to Camp David; and all throughout the "Roadmap to Peace," successive American presidents have tried to facilitate peace between Israel, a nation simply trying to preserve itself, and its neighbors, who are interminably dedicated to its destruction. And they have been predictably, inevitably, and spectacularly unsuccessful.

But, of course, that's not going to stop President Bush, as he and his ever-buoyant Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, take another stab at it, beginning

this evening in Washington and moving to Annapolis tomorrow. Most observers, including the usually obtuse Middle East analysts in the mainstream press, have already declared that these talks will be a failure, particularly in light of the fact that Israel's principal ally is already engaged in a war in the region and the radicals of Hamas are now officially in control of the mechanism of Palestinian government.

Yet, oddly enough, in spite of this widely agreed upon less than stellar outlook, this conference will be extremely well attended. Indeed, even the formerly skeptical governments of Saudi Arabia and Syria agreed at the last minute to send representatives. The official explanation for the acquiescence of these erstwhile holdouts was the decision to include a discussion of the future of the Golan Heights on the conference agenda. This makes sense, we guess, but it still strikes us as a little odd. But then again, there is little about this conference that doesn't strike us as odd.

President Bush has always been something of an outlier among American presidents when it comes to sticking his nose into Israeli-Palestinian affairs. Unlike his predecessors, he's never made a huge deal about resolving the conflict and he certainly has never appeared as desperate as some previous presidents have to win himself a Nobel Peace Prize. So why is he doing this? And just as important, why is everyone else playing along?

As far as we can tell, there are three possible explanations. First, it is possible that President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and Secretary of State Rice really are as dimwitted and naïve as all of their predecessors and despite ample evidence to the contrary still believe that something meaningful can be achieved by sitting everyone down in a room and asking Israel to make concessions that will be neither appreciated nor reciprocated. Second, it is possible that Bush knows that this is a pointless exercise but feels he must at least go through the motions and affect support for the "peace process" simply because that's what American presidents do.

We've been around long enough to know that it would be foolish of us to dismiss either of these two explanations out of hand. Washington has a way of proving even the most cynical observers to be insufficiently skeptical. And dumber things have happened. That said, neither of these two explanations accounts for the broad attendance expected in Annapolis. The Israelis and Palestinians (represented by Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah) would have to be at any conference, but the idea that the EU, China, Russia, and the Arab League – including the Syrians – would participate in Bush's delusion or his ruse strikes us as a little sketchy. That may be what's happening here, but we're sufficiently dubious to wonder if something else isn't going on.

And that brings us to the third possible explanation for this conference, namely that there is something out of the ordinary going on here. We can't say with any certainty what it is, but we do think it is interesting and telling that the only major Middle Eastern players not participating in this conference are Iran and its Palestinian clients in Hamas. Just as telling, we think, is the participation of the Syrians, who are generally considered to be wards of the Mad Mullahs, but who will be Annapolis nonetheless. So why?

If we were to speculate, we'd guess that the Bush administration is going to use this conference to explain to the world – and the Muslim world in particular – how the next 14 months are going to go down. Bush is almost certainly buoyed by the recent progress in Iraq and especially by the repudiation of Iranian meddling by even Iraqi Shiites. Al Qaeda is the biggest loser in the surge, but the Mad Mullahs are not far behind. If anyone appears to have lost its invasion of Iraq, right now, we'd say that Iranians have.

The administration almost certainly feels that its influence is once again on the rise, while the Iranians have been dealt a series of setbacks. And given this, we'd guess the President will use this conference to send a message to the rest of the Muslim world about where its loyalties should lie and where its best interests do lie.

Now, for the record, we are not predicting any sort of imminent military action against Iran. We have made that mistake too many times before to be suckered in again. What we are doing, though, is suggesting that the United States has far greater leverage right now than it has had in a long time and is likely looking to use that leverage against Iran.

President Bush and Vice President Cheney have repeatedly promised to prevent the Iranians from acquiring nuclear weapons, and neither man has ever been known for making idle threats. More to the point, Bush et al. understand what too many of their political opponents don't, which is that bin Laden was right when he said that the Muslim world does invariably gravitate to the "strong horse." And right now, the American horse is looking quite a bit stronger and more resilient than any other horse in the region.

So the Bush administration is feeling empowered. The Mad Mullahs have been dealt some setbacks. And Bush has somehow managed to gather all of the major global players except the Iranians in one place to make his case. The only thing missing at this point is some sort of evidence that Bush's case is one that should be listened to and heeded by the rest of the world. And that brings us back to the last-minute attendees, the Syrians.

The Syrians have said that they are attending the Annapolis conference to discuss the disposition of the Golan Heights, territory that the Israelis have held for more than four decades, during which time Israel has had several leaders that were far more accommodative than Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. So what makes the Syrians, or anyone else for that matter, believe that there will be any progress on the issue now? The answer to this question is, of course, nothing, which suggests, to us at least, that the Syrians are in Annapolis for reasons other than those to which they admit.

Again, we can't say what that reason might be, but we do wish to note that the government of Bashar Assad has been behaving oddly of late. Recall that just over two months ago, Israeli warplanes struck a

target deep within Syrian territory, destroying some sort of weapons site or manufacturing facility. And despite the fact the global community always stands at the ready to condemn Israel for all offenses, real or imagined, Syria has sought no international support and asked for no international condemnation of this very real offense perpetrated by its most hated enemy. Again, the question is "why?"

Serious answers to that question have been exceptionally hard to come by. And in fact, the normally tight-lipped Israelis have thus far been the only ones who have even mentioned the attack, with both the Syrians and the Americans trying desperately to avoid acknowledging that a strike even took place.

The most common explanation, both for the strike and for the refusal to discuss it, posits that the Syrians were, with help from North Korea, building a nuclear reactor that would, upon completion, have allowed Syria to process plutonium and eventually to build a nuclear bomb. If that were indeed the case, it would be exceptionally awkward for the Syrians. It would be awkward for the Americans as well, though considerably less so, which is one of the reasons why some analysts have questioned this explanation.

Over the weekend, for example, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* published a piece by Yossi Melman suggesting that the real explanation is something far more sinister than even a nuclear reactor. To wit:

Prof. Uzi Even of Tel Aviv University is challenging [the standard explanations] here for the first time. On the basis of an analysis of the same satellite photos, which have been published in the media and on Web sites and are accessible to everyone, he believes that the structure that was attacked and destroyed was not a nuclear reactor. Even, a former Meretz MK, is a chemist who until 1968 worked at the nuclear reactor in Dimona (KAMAG - Hebrew for the Nuclear Research Center). For years he has been keeping track of, and writing

about, Israel's nuclear policy and the proliferation of nuclear weapons worldwide.

Even's questions relate to several substantive issues. First, in the reactor in Yongbyon, one can clearly see a chimney, which is necessary for the emission of the radioactive gases (incidentally, based on the emission of the gases experts can determine the capacity of the reactor). In the satellite photos of the structure in Syria there is no chimney. It could be claimed that the Syrians may not have had time to build it. This is a reasonable answer, but it is overshadowed by the fact that there is evidence that the structure was under construction already four years ago. There are satellite photos of the site from 2003. In these photos one can clearly see in one of the building walls openings, which disappeared in the 2007 photos. "We can assume that construction began even before 2003," says Even. "In all those years, five years or even more, a chimney had still not been built? Very strange."

No less strange in his opinion is the fact that the "reactor" did not have cooling towers. The pumping station seen in the photos, 5 kilometers from the site, cannot, according to him, be a substitute for such towers. "A structure without cooling towers cannot be a reactor," he says, pointing to the satellite photo from Yongbyon, in which one can clearly see the cooling tower, with steam rising from it.

Another structure essential for a reactor is missing from the Syrian photos: a plutonium separation facility....

And there is an additional question. If this was, in fact, a nuclear reactor, whose construction was not completed, clearly

it would have taken the Syrians several years until they were able to operate it and produce plutonium. Why was Israel in a rush to attack a reactor that was under construction, years before it would have become operational? Was it willing to risk an all-out war with Syria because of a reactor in stages of construction?

Even and Melman conclude that Israel would not have attacked Syria if it were merely building a reactor and that what was really destroyed was "something very nasty and vicious, and even more dangerous than a reactor," namely "a plant for processing plutonium, namely a factory for assembling the bomb."

We have no idea whether or not this Professor Even has any idea what he's talking about, but he certainly makes a convincing case. And more important, he makes a case that cannot and will not be refuted by the parties involved. The Syrians would never admit to such a thing; the Israelis apparently will remain tight lipped; and certainly the Bush administration wouldn't want to discuss the issue, for fear that it would derail the "progress" recently made with North Korea, the purported supplier of Syria's fissile material.

Of course, just because the Bush administration won't discuss the issue publicly, that doesn't mean that it won't discuss it privately at, say, a global Middle East peace conference in Annapolis. And just because Syria has been receiving nuclear know-how of some sort from North Korea, that doesn't mean that it hasn't also been receiving information from and/or sharing information with Iran. After all, Iran too has dealt with North Korea and has also become the prevailing force within Syrian politics. Whatever Syria was doing, whatever Israel bombed, Iran likely knows about it and perhaps even facilitated it. Yet Syria and not Iran will be represented this week in Annapolis.

We think it should go without saying here that all of this is speculation. But it is informed speculation. And when something appears "off," and there is no information as to why that might be, informed speculation is the best one can do.

Right now, both the official refusal to discuss the Israeli strike on Syria and the official explanation for the Annapolis peace conference appear “off.” In the case of the conference, it may turn out that the official explanation is entirely accurate, as ludicrous and naïve as it sounds. We’re not convinced, however, and we can’t shake the feeling that the two “off” events are somehow related.

Time will tell. And we will too, when we find out.

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