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## THEY SAID IT

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said. "One can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Lewis Carol, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865.

## In this Issue

2008: No Mandate for "Change."

## 2008: NO MANDATE FOR "CHANGE."

Four years ago, as President Bush began his re-election campaign, we were among only a very small handful of prognosticators who rightly understood the dynamics at play in the election. We thus rightly predicted that his campaign would prove successful and that he would ultimately be re-elected, moreover with coattails long enough to increase the GOP's majority in both houses of Congress.

The usual suspects – from the mainstream media commentators to the talking heads and columnists to the professional political analysts – all greatly overestimated the anger that the electorate felt for George Bush and the effect that that anger would have on the outcome of the election. In the end, the mainstream political players wound up creating an echo chamber in which the media's spin reinforced the analyst's spin, which reinforced the Democratic operatives' spin, which, in turn, reinforced the media's spin. And so on. Self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating myths dominated the political discussion and affected nearly the entirety of the campaign, right down to the early exit polls that forecast a landslide for Senator John Kerry.

To a lesser, though undeniable degree, this campaign is taking on some very similar dynamics. Already, we've seen the media's and the various political players' inclination toward hyperbole and delusion. Both Hillary Clinton's "inevitability" and the "collapse" of her campaign *after only one state* can be taken as evidence of the mainstream players' tendency to rush to judgment and to do so based on little or no actual, factual information. We fully expect this misinterpretation of the evidence to persist through November.

Specifically, we expect that once again, far too much attention will be given to the electorate's "anger" and to its dissatisfaction with the status quo. After all, whether the media or the Democrats realize it or not (and we suspect that they do not), President Bush is not on the ballot this year, and neither is anyone else directly

associated with his administration. Moreover, even if this were not the case, the anger and contempt the media believe that the electorate holds for President Bush and his policies is wildly overstated, a fact that will, we believe, cause more than a few of the “professionals” to misjudge the dynamics of this campaign. They may not misjudge them as critically as they did in '04, but they appear likely to misjudge them nonetheless.

And that brings us to....

*Prediction #1: 2008 will, essentially, be a status quo election. Though the GOP still lacks both the leaders and the ideas to challenge the Democrats for control of Congress, the Democrats too are fundamentally weak, suggesting that any movement by the electorate one way or the other will be nominal at best. The Democrats will, then, maintain control of Congress, but there will be no majority-fortifying landslide. The Democrats' majority in the House will not increase notably, and their margin in the Senate will increase only by a couple of seats, gained through retirement and attrition rather than ideological realignment.*

It would be hard, we think, to overstate the awfulness of the Democrats' first year back in the majority of Congress. Not only did they do absolutely nothing, but they did it with aplomb; consistently picking fights they couldn't win, openly flaunting their majority and their electoral mandate only to fail to get enough votes, repeatedly issuing threats they couldn't back up. These people were a laughingstock. They excited no one. And come November, they will not be able to excite the electorate like they did two years earlier.

It doesn't help matters any that the one man who could potentially improve the Democrats' chances, the man who put together the last campaign, Illinois Congressman and onetime Clinton henchman Rahm Emanuel, is on the outs with the party's netroots base and thus with the base's Congressional champion, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Emanuel, of course, is a <GASP!> “centrist,” which means that he is as bad as, if not worse than, a Republican to many on the angry left. And if Emanuel is shut out

of the Congressional campaign planning, then the Democrats' chances of motivating the electorate are pretty slim.

The only thing the Democrats appear to have going for them right now is that their opponents are the Congressional Republicans. A less striking and inspiring group of politicians one would be hard-pressed to find. Name the Republican House Minority Leader. We dare you. Go on. Better yet, name the Republican House whip. Or the Senate whip. Can't do it, can you? It's OK. Don't be embarrassed. No one can. Or almost no one. And no one will see cause to put these guys back in charge of one-third of the federal government. At least not yet.

For all the talk of “change” this year, there will be precious little of it, especially in Congress. We guess all the talk of change stems from the country's exhaustion with President Bush. But there's not a single politician of either party who will effect change on Washington by getting rid of the President. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment will take care of that, and all the rest is just posturing.

Believe the hype about change if you want, but don't be surprised if when the year is over, the makeup of Congress looks remarkably like the makeup of Congress today. The Democrats' margins may be a little bigger, particularly in the Senate, where retirements will hurt the GOP. But for the most part, any “change” will be largely superficial. The status quo will be this year's big winner.

But that doesn't mean that nothing will happen in Washington....

*Prediction #2: By year-end, Nancy Pelosi, the first woman Speaker of the House, will be the first woman former-Speaker of the House.*

Now, we know what you're thinking. We just predicted that the GOP would not retake either house of Congress, but we turned around immediately

and predicted that the Speaker of the House would nonetheless be dethroned. How can that be?

Pelosi will, in fact, be deposed. But not by the Republicans. Rather, she'll be deposed by the unhappy "moderates" in her party, a great many of whom have grown tired of her "leadership," if that's the right word.

Four years ago, when Minority-Leader-for-Life Dick Gephardt finally gave up and retired from the House, Pelosi was elected to fill his leadership spot (and eventually to become Speaker). But she didn't make many friends along the way. And one of those whom she alienated was the man who serves now as the official second-in-command in the House, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer. Hoyer, a centrist from Maryland, has never been particularly close to Pelosi, a nutcase from San Francisco, and any residual loyalty he may have felt for her undoubtedly evaporated last year, when she tried to push her fellow anti-warrior, Jack Murtha, into the Majority Leader slot.

Hoyer is a serious threat to Pelosi. Pelosi represents the angry netroots types who claimed victory and the reins of the party after last year's midterm sweep. But the netroots have been remarkably unproductive this year. And Pelosi has been remarkably incompetent.

Hoyer will, we believe, challenge Nancy Pelosi for the Speakership next winter, after the elections confirm the slim Democratic majority. And he will win.

We should note that the same thing would happen in the Senate, where Majority Leader Harry Reid has been even less effective and more embarrassing than Pelosi, if it were not for the fact that none of the senior Democratic Senators is particularly impressive. Would the Democrats throw Reid overboard for his second, Majority Whip Dick Durbin? Not a chance. Reid may be an embarrassment, but Durbin is probably worse. Some Senate Democrats may grow jealous watching their House counterparts throw off the shackles of incompetent leadership, but that will pass quickly, as they realize, sadly, that Reid is probably the best they can do.

*Prediction #3: The short and annoying political career of John Edwards will, mercifully, come to an end.*

It may be hard to believe, given how big a part of the political process he has been for the last several years, but John Edwards has only won one election in his entire life, and that was ten years ago. Today, he appears destined never to win another. And this is good news, for the country and for the Democratic Party.

Most political observers have lumped Edwards in with fellow Democrat Barack Obama and Republican upstart Mike Huckabee as the "populists" in this campaign. And although it is true that Edwards sounds populist themes, that is where the similarity to Obama and Huckabee ends. Obama and Huckabee both promise hope; they offer redemption; in the great American tradition, they are optimists. Edwards is not. He is angry. He wants to fight. He brags about being a bad-tempered kid who would scrap whenever he could. If the Republican Party was, as the mainstream press argued, dominated during the 1990s by "angry white males," then a Democratic Party under John Edwards would have been dominated by ultra-angry, ultra-self-righteous and potentially violent white males. If the problem with George Bush was his false bravado, then what, pray tell, would have happened to the country under the guidance of an effete pretty boy whose entire political persona and agenda were based on the idea of fighting abstract bad guys?

Nothing good. That's what.

It didn't have to be this way, you know. Edwards could have been an optimist. He *should* have been an optimist. He likes to tell the tale of his father working in the mill, and the one-room house he was brought home to, and all the other tribulations of his youth. But he never finishes the story. He never relays the best part, namely that this son of a mill worker who lived in a shanty nonetheless grew up to be a multi-millionaire with a 28,000 square foot home. John Edwards is the quintessential American success story.

But rather than emphasize that success, he has chosen instead to stoke anger and resentment for political gain.

But now that's done. After practically living in Iowa for the last four years, Edwards finished exactly where he did in 2004, in second place. He tallied a lackluster 17% in New Hampshire, and unless something dramatic and unexpected happens, he is done.

Oh, he'll keep fighting, mind you. But that's to be expected. As liberal blogger Mickey Kaus put it, "why would Edwards drop out? What else does he have to do?"

Edwards' end is a blessing in so many ways, not the least for the Democratic Party. Contrary to the mainstream media myths about the Gingrich Revolution, anger does not win elections. And Edwards catered to and egged on the angrier elements of the Democratic Party. This was a recipe for disaster. Anger is what destroyed Democratic hopes in '02 and '04, and it would have doomed them again in '08. The demise of John Edwards suggests, though, that at least some in the party are willing to move beyond their anger. And that can only be good for the country.

*Prediction #4: New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg will run for President, accomplishing little other than enriching a handful of political strategists and operatives.*

It now appears more and more likely that Mayor Mike Bloomberg will decide in March that he has too much money and thus must waste a bunch of it on a pointless and fruitless independent run for the White House. He will lose. And no one will care.

Bloomberg apparently thinks that there is some political void that screams out to be filled and that he is the man to do it. Well, maybe. But we find it hard to see how a left-of-center nanny-stater would offer anything unique or interesting to voters.

Say what you will about Ross Perot (and certainly there is much to say). But at least he tapped into a vein of political discontent previously ignored by the

two major parties. Yet even he did nothing except play spoiler and clear a path to the White House for Bill Clinton. He didn't win a state. He didn't win an electoral vote. He didn't do a thing.

We just can't see how Bloomberg would improve or even equal Perot's record. Sure, he could throw gobs of cash at the race, but so what? He simply does not have a niche to fill. Indeed, we think it would be hard to distinguish his campaign and governing agendas from Hillary's.

To make matters worse, the speculation is that Bloomberg will choose Nebraska Republican Chuck Hagel as his running mate. If he does so, it will be difficult not to see their campaign as some sort of twisted, inside joke. Hagel has made the Iraq war his signature issue. And he has been wrong about virtually everything. Indeed, it would be hard to find a Washington player who has been wrong about Iraq more often than Hagel. A year ago, Hagel called the surge in Iraq "the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam . . ." Wow. A twofer. Wrong about the surge and wrong about Vietnam. Good luck with your candidacy, Chuck.

In any case, Bloomberg looks like he will run. Who cares?

*Prediction #5: Hillary Clinton will be the Democratic nominee for President of the United States.*

It was kind of fun this past week, watching the media fawn over Obama and watching the Clinton machine come slightly unhinged. But as we know as well as or better than anyone else in politics, it is always (always!) a mistake to underestimate the Clintons. They may be self-absorbed. They may be tiresome. They may be bullies. But to paraphrase Oakland Raider owner Al Davis, they just win, baby.

Even if Hillary had not won New Hampshire last night, it would have been foolish to count her out. She has tons of money. She has a great organization, filled with the top political operatives from the last two decades. She has three big states coming up – New

York, California, and Florida – which she will almost certainly win. And she and her husband play “the game” better than anyone else around.

To tell the truth, we’ve actually been impressed with Barack Obama, who does indeed possess a great many political skills. But he just doesn’t have the experience and the desire that the Clintons have. Obama may well be a better politician than Hillary will ever be. But he is most definitely not a better campaigner. This is what the Clintons do best. And up until somebody drives the proverbial stake through their hearts, it would be a mistake not to expect them to keep coming back and to keep winning.

Well over a year ago, we predicted that Hillary would be the next president of the United States. But we miscalculated on at least three factors. First, we entirely underestimated the disdain the angry-left netroots folks have for her. Turns out, they hate her almost as much as some Republicans do, maybe more.

The interesting thing is that Obama’s victory last week in the Iowa caucuses has only exacerbated this hatred for Hillary. The left saw it as an opportunity to be free of both the Clintons and the centrism they represent. And that opportunity has now been snatched away from them. All of the scorn, all of the spite, all of the conspiracy mongering previously reserved exclusively for George Bush and Dick Cheney will henceforth be transferred to Hillary and Bill, at least until after the Democratic convention this summer. And it’s not as if she will be able to placate these folks by choosing Obama as her running mate (which she undoubtedly will do). They’re not really all that into him either. His value to them was simply as the anti-Hillary. If he gets on board with her, his value to them will be lost.

The second miscalculation we made last year was in misunderstanding the role that Iraq would play in this campaign. We should have known better, of course, but we underplayed Iraq, thinking that Hillary would be able to maintain some reasonable middle ground on the issue. And though she certainly has been better

on the war than any of her Democratic rivals, she still has some Iraq problems, problems she herself seems to acknowledge.

Four-plus years ago, we urged the Democrats to take a different approach to the war, to support the President, to ensure swift victory, and thus to enable themselves to get back to their political strengths, health care, entitlements, and the rest. Obviously, they didn’t take our advice then. But they appear to be taking it now. Nearly all of the major Democratic players have indicated a desire to “get beyond” Iraq. They want to focus on “dinner table” issues, those which they do best and on which we suggested they focus. As far as they’re concerned, it’s time to “move on.”

But it’s too late.

By opposing the surge and insisting prematurely on an American declaration of defeat, the Democrats as a whole have reinforced their image as weak on national security. The Iraq war may not yet be popular. But so what? Vietnam wasn’t popular in 1972 either. And the Democrat, George McGovern, lost 49 states that year. More to the point, as we noted last week, the surge has worked and the Iraq war looks like it will be “won.” And the Democrats in general will be remembered for doing all they could to prevent that victory. Though Hillary did her best not to get bogged down in her fellow Democrats’ defeatism, it will be very hard for her to escape her party’s legacy.

Our third miscalculation involves the economy and the role it will play in the election. Note for the record that Hillary has made a repeal of the Bush tax cuts the centerpiece of her economic program, in large part because they are, in her estimation, “fiscally irresponsible.” But with the economy wavering and with her own party promising to provide some \$100 billion or more in economic stimulus, Hillary is going to have a hard time making the case that raising taxes in the name of fiscal responsibility is the right thing to do. President Bush will push to have those tax cuts made permanent. And what’s Hillary going to

do about it? Insist on “soaking the rich” even as a recession looms? Not likely.

We have no doubt that Hillary and her husband’s economic brain trust, folks like Gene Sperling and Bob Rubin, will come up with another economic stimulus plan before long. But in the meantime, if President Bush pushes hard to make his tax cuts permanent, Hillary will have a tough time pushing back.

*Prediction #6: John McCain will be the Republican nominee. And he will also be the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.*

Nearly three years ago, we wrote the following:

[There] is likely to be a greater reliance [going forward] by the administration on the assets brought to the political debate by Senator McCain. Though Bush and McCain have had their problems over the years and though McCain has been a persistent thorn in the side of the conservatives who have, until recently, been Bush’s most loyal supporters, Bush simply needs McCain now (and for the foreseeable future) and therefore must rely on him to continue to be the most eloquent and effective defender of the war in Iraq and the broader war on terror.

If you’re looking for the ultimate upshot of last week’s Senate vote, then, we believe that it will be John McCain’s emergence as the long-awaited unofficial heir-apparent to the Bush presidency. With Dick Cheney having declared his firm intention not to run for president, Bush has been without an obvious successor, and there has been considerable speculation over the years as to who will ultimately fill that spot, with guesses ranging from brother Jeb to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. We suspect the speculation can now end and that McCain will get the gig.

Some will question whether at this point that’s a position McCain would want, and certainly any doubts he might entertain would be understandable. That said, a sitting President, regardless of momentary political travails, can offer innumerable benefits to a successor, particularly in an intra-party contest. Given his own natural constituency, additional backing from the President would make McCain an exceptionally difficult candidate to beat in what is expected to be a bruising primary campaign. Bush may be down, but he’s far from out, and if he stages a comeback, his endorsement will carry significant weight.

Up until a couple of weeks ago, it looked as if we would probably be wrong and John McCain would disappear into the history books. But now we’re pretty sure we had the dynamic right and that McCain will build on his victory in New Hampshire and slowly but surely become the consensus choice for the Republican nomination. A great many conservatives will be unhappy about this, principally because of his apostasy on a number of issues conservatives hold dear. And they will have just cause to be leery.

But the fact of the matter is that on the single most important issues of the times, McCain is the only candidate who can make the case that he will continue to pursue the enemy until it is defeated. He was right about the surge before it was called “the surge.” And he has been serving his country with honor for more than four decades now. We have our own beefs with John McCain based on our personal experiences with him. But that single word, “honor,” will, we believe, be the deciding factor in this race. No word better describes John McCain. And no word could be further from the Clintons. Voters say they want “change.” Well, McCain will promise to give it to them by disposing of the Clintons as a political force.

Additionally, McCain will have an opportunity, we believe, to get right with much of the conservative base this year on the GOP’s signature issue, tax cuts.

Though McCain opposed both of the Bush tax cuts, he now readily admits that they have done wonders for the economy. If he takes a lead role in pushing to make those tax cuts permanent, Senator McCain can do himself and the country a world of good.

McCain will not simply stroll into the Oval Office, mind you. As we noted above, underestimating the Clintons is a serious mistake. And McCain has his own problems, namely his temper and his age. By election day, he will be two years older than Ronald Reagan was on election day 1980. And he looks it. And though the mainstream press will continue to lose its affection for him, independent voters will not.

McCain will, we believe, offer another olive branch to conservatives by selecting former Senator Fred Thompson as his running mate. We here at The Political Forum have had our problems with Thompson as well, but we tend to think he would make a pretty sensible choice as a Vice President. Thompson, it seems, has taken a cue from the current Vice President, Dick Cheney, who has been much maligned, of course, but has proven an incredibly valuable asset to his boss. Like Cheney, Thompson has a low-key, laid-back attitude and appears to believe that political pandering is beneath him. Over the last couple of months Thompson has become something of a hero to the old "Leave Us Alone Coalition," refusing to reveal too much of his personal life on such issues as religion, guns, and other private matters.

Some may say that Thompson is too laid back and too congenial to be the running mate, especially given that the running mate is traditionally the attack dog of the campaign. But that didn't hurt Cheney, whose attacks were even more effective for their subtlety. And more to the point, does anyone really think that John McCain needs an attack dog? Really?

And so there you have it, folks: McCain-Thompson vs. Clinton-Obama, with the old, white men coming out on top.

Four years ago, we ended our forecast piece by noting that 2004 would be "a very bad year for the Democrats." 2008 will not be particularly bad for either party, but given many Democrats' expectations, it will seem pretty rough when it's over. The "status quo" is hardly all that disappointing, but if you're expecting dramatic "change," it can be real downer. And so a downer 2008 will be.

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