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## THEY SAID IT

To sum up, if you could look down from the moon, as Menippus once did, on the countless hordes of mortals, you'd think you saw a swarm of flies or gnats quarrelling amongst themselves, fighting, plotting, stealing, playing, making love, being born, growing old, and dying. It's hard to believe how much trouble and tragedy this tiny little creature can stir up, short-lived as he is, for sometimes a brief war or an outbreak of plague can carry off and destroy many thousands at once.

Desiderius Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, 1511.

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## BILL AND HILL: A BLUEPRINT FOR VICTORY (OF SORTS).

We're not entirely sure what it is about election season that causes the collective pundit class to settle early on a theme and then to stick to it no matter how meaningless and illogical it becomes. We suppose it has something to do with the prognosticator's perpetual plague, the tendency to predict that which one hopes to see occur. But whatever the case, the conventional wisdom settled upon by the bulk of the mainstream pundit community over the last several election cycles has been obviously wrong long before election day, but has remained largely unchallenged right up until the end.

This year looks as though it will be no exception. The theme of this election is the collapse of the Republican coalition and of the Republican Party. As Peggy Noonan declared the other day, "George Bush destroyed the Republican Party." And now the likes of Mitt Romney, John McCain, and Mike Huckabee are fighting over the carcass. Moreover, conservative opinion-peddlers, like talk radio fixtures Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin, are exacerbating and accelerating the party's demise, openly and aggressively disparaging the frontrunners for the presidential nomination and declaring that the specific candidates are unfit to lead the party once headed by Ronald Reagan.

Now, like most conventional wisdom, this is partially grounded in reality. The Republican Party is indeed collapsing. But we tend to believe that the reasons for this collapse are far different from those alleged by the pundits. Moreover, we believe that that is only part of the story, and when presented alone, it is distorting. It is also, unsurprisingly, the part of the story that the mainstream pundits find so agreeable and are thus so willing to underscore over and over again.

The other part of the story, the part that has largely been overlooked by the conventional wisdom and thus does not factor into the general meme of this election, is that the Republicans are hardly alone in their breakdown. The Democratic Party too is collapsing; the much broader and much older Democratic coalition, the one assembled by Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, as opposed to Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, is eating its own young.

It's not that the mainstream commentators haven't noticed the symptoms of the Democratic collapse. They have, to some degree at least. But they can't seem to grasp the long-term significance of the event.

Take for example, the case of Bill Clinton. It is hardly surprising that our old pal Bill would be the center of media attention. After all, his wife is running for President of the United States, which puts him in the unprecedented and, frankly, undreamed of position of "running" for nation's first co-president/First Gentleman. That's an incredibly intriguing story in and of itself. And coupled with the fact that Bill possesses a magnetic personality that commands a crowd wherever he goes, it makes for great TV.

But Bill's place in this campaign is far more important than the majority of pundits and journalists seem to realize. Indeed, while Bill is a big story, the real Bill story is actually bigger than Bill. You see, it isn't just that Bill is the first man barred from running from re-election who is nonetheless running for re-election. And it isn't just that Bill is the focus of attention on the morning shows. Or that he is the object of scorn among the netroots bloggers. Or that he is everywhere. Nor is it about his ambition, or his personal frustration, or his boredom, or his need for power. The real story is that the story is Bill Clinton.

To our knowledge, the only one who has figured this out is the one man who knows the Clintons better than anyone, the man who ran the Clintons political life right up through Bill's last campaign in 1996, and even beyond. Yes, Dick Morris. And yesterday, Morris described the forest that all the tree-watchers still seem to be missing:

Is he crazy? Crazy like a fox.

He has two goals and is achieving them both spectacularly.

First, he wants to be the same kind of lightning rod for Hillary that she was for him during his run for the presidency . . .

In the days before Iowa and leading up to New Hampshire, Hillary was the prime topic of political discussion.

She took shots for misusing Bill's record and trying to adopt it as her own, for minimizing King's contribution to civil rights, for crying, for attacking her opponents, and for changing her campaign style to become more likeable.

Now, she rarely gets hit anymore. They're hitting Bill instead.

Like a red cape, he is attracting the attention of the bull so his wife the matador escapes unharmed.

The other method behind his madness is that Bill wants to suck up all the oxygen in the room and dominate the coverage of the Democratic contest. By doing so, he cuts Obama out of the news, pushes him off the front page, and usurps the headlines.

Of course, he also crowds out Hillary, but that's OK, given her large leads in the national polls and in all the big states whose primaries are coming up.

Bill's involvement in the campaign isn't about his ego or his legacy or even, as Hillary so ridiculously put it, about "love." It's about the same thing it's always about for the Clintons. It's about winning. And more to the point, it's about winning at any cost.

What surprised us most when it became clear that Mrs. Clinton was going to run for president was the fact that so few of the party big shots objected. And those who did were concerned about her “electability” or her personality or some other subjective measure of Hillary’s political presence. No one, or at least no one important, was concerned about the effect that it might have on the party. Apparently eight years wasn’t enough for any of them to have learned that the Clintons are concerned first and foremost about the Clintons, Party be damned.

We’re inclined to label this failing on the part of party big shots “collective amnesia.” But that really doesn’t get at the audacity and destructiveness of the Clintons. Amnesia, after all, indicates that something has been forgotten. But most Democrats couldn’t have forgotten about the true nature of the Clintons and their ambitions, since they never acknowledged them in the first place.

Nevertheless, the numbers are pretty clear. When Bill Clinton took office in January, 1993, Democrats controlled both houses of Congress, a majority of governorships, and a majority of state legislatures. By the time he was re-inaugurated in 1997, the numbers had been reversed. Republicans controlled both houses of Congress for the first time in half-a-century. They controlled a majority of governorships and a majority of state legislatures, including a number for the first time ever. As bad as the 2000s have been for the Republicans, the 1990s were worse for the Democrats, save one.

Of course, the real damage that Bill did was that which went beyond mere elections. By the time Bill left office, significant members of the Democratic coalition were either on the verge of rebellion against the party or had been rendered entirely impotent.

The most notable of these, of course, was the feminist movement, which was the most obvious Democratic coalition member to have suffered for Bill Clinton’s sins. It has been ten years now since the public became acquainted with a zaftig, young former White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. And it has been ten years since anyone has paid any

attention whatsoever to anything that the feminists – even feminist icons – have to say about anything. Coincidence? Of course not. The feminists sold their proverbial souls to save the man they loved. They were willing to overlook his...ummm... “indiscretions,” as long as he remained firmly ensconced in the White House with his feminist hero wife by his side and promised to keep abortion legal.

Two weeks back, on the anniversary of the breaking of the Lewinsky scandal, *The Wall Street Journal’s* James Taranto reminded us that the most brazen sell out among the feminists was none other than Gloria Steinem, who went so far in defense of her man that she willingly trampled on three decades of feminist legal and political “progress” to declare a moratorium on sexual harassment and, essentially, to grant men “one free grope.” Were Steinem not so risible and destructive a political force in her own right, we might actually have been embarrassed for her.

In any case, Bill and Hill are back on the campaign trail, playing their supporters for suckers, convincing the political establishment to underestimate them, and destroying the longstanding political relationships that have marked the Democratic Party since the New Deal. This time, the victim of the Clinton assault is the “minority community,” whom the Clintons have targeted to undermine their feisty and talented challenger, Barack Obama.

Here again, the mainstream analysts and prognosticators have a hint of what is going on, but fail to see the bigger picture. The Clintons have, in the wake of their egregious assaults on Obama, been called out for playing “identity politics,” pitting white voters against black voters. Certainly this is true, but once more it’s only part of the story.

For starters, the Clintons have not only been playing the race card, but have been doing so with the support of the traditional black establishment, people like former Atlanta Mayor and Ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young, who recently joined in the ridicule of the nation’s first viable black presidential candidate, suggesting publicly that Clinton had more *bona fides* with the black community and had almost

certainly slept with more black women than Obama. We're not entirely sure how sleeping with a lot of women gives one credibility, but apparently it does. Perhaps Gloria Steinem can explain it to us.

The way this works out, then, is that the Clintons are running a campaign explicitly playing up the race of their opponent and the old civil rights establishment is giving them cover. The results of the Clinton's strategy are plain to see. In Saturday's South Carolina primary, Barack Obama won nearly 80% of the black vote, but won a meager 24% of the white vote, indicating that the voters of South Carolina decided, contra Martin Luther King Jr., that it was, indeed, better to judge a man (or woman) by the color of his skin than by the content of his character. And those who made their career playing up the fact that they once marched alongside the Reverend King have either sat idly by or actively encouraged those who would see the goals of the civil rights movement turned on their head. Needless to say, the sacrifice in credibility for the black establishment is all but certain to be as great as that made by the feminists a decade ago.

The second thing to note about the Clintons' strategy is that it's working. Barack Obama was in a no win position in South Carolina. Sure, he won the state and purportedly has momentum going into Super-duper Tuesday. But he has now effectively been labeled "the black candidate." And on the off chance that the vote totals from South Carolina weren't enough to make that label stick, Bill emphatically reinforced it Saturday night by explicitly linking Obama to Jesse Jackson, who also won South Carolina (in 1984 and '88) but who was perpetually pigeon-holed as the "black candidate." A few weeks ago, after the Iowa caucuses, it appeared that Barack Obama would break away from the Jackson legacy and establish himself as a candidate who just happened to be black. But the Clintons have worked overtime to ensure that that won't happen, and after this weekend, it would be difficult to conclude that they have not been successful.

The third important point to take away from the Clintons' racial strategy is the way they are both playing up and encouraging hostility between various

minority groups. The Clintons understand full well that there is a certain amount of animosity that exists between, say, blacks and Latinos. But rather than try to heal the rifts and convince various racial constituencies to band together to form a plurality of voters, the Clintons have been eager to exploit said rifts. They would never be so brazen as to say so openly, but one of their advisors very nearly did. In the January 21 issue of *The New Yorker*, Sergio Bendix, one of the Clinton's pollsters, gave away the game:

The Hispanic voter – and I want to say this very carefully – has not shown a lot of willingness or affinity to support black candidates.

Indeed. The Clinton's strategy with regard to Latino voters is simple: make sure that they understand that Obama is "the black candidate," and as such will be more concerned about blacks than any other minority groups. This clearly contradicts the promises and rhetoric employed by Obama himself, but that's beside the point. The Clintons believe that all they need to do is plant the seeds of resentment and the voters will do the rest. And they're probably right. Were their schemes not so disgraceful, they might be described as brilliant.

But that, of course, is the way it always is with the Clintons. Their schemes are brilliant but disgraceful. Their schemes are designed to win, regardless of the cost and regardless of the margin. Remember that Bill, one of the allegedly most popular presidents in recent memory, never won a majority of votes. He did whatever it took to win a plurality. And that was enough.

A number of left-leaning commentators are upset by this, unhappy that the once optimistic and earnest-appearing Bill Clinton would stoop to such treachery. Naturally, the only way they can believe this nonsense is to block out the majority of the 1990s, a decade during which Bill and Hillary manifestly demonstrated both the depths of their "character" and their political acumen. On Saturday, Peter Wehner, a former aide to Presidents Reagan and H.W. Bush, and a onetime chief speechwriter for the current President Bush, called

Obama “one of the most remarkable political talents in our lifetime.” However true that may be, his talents are clearly surpassed by Bill Clinton’s, the man who has played every big-timer in Washington and is trying, successfully so far, to play Obama as well. One might have hoped that a former president would be above that. But one would be wrong.

Does this mean that the Democratic coalition is crumbling specifically because of the Clintons? Well, no and yes. As we have noted for a decade ourselves, both parties are bound to collapse and bound to re-emerge, changed and better suited for the post-Cold War political climate. The Democratic coalition was bound to crumble. It was only a matter of time.

What the Clintons did was to recognize this and to use it to their advantage. The first time they chipped off a piece of the coalition, it was an accident, a result of Bill’s large and uncontrollable appetites. But this time, it is conscious destruction. The Clintons have seen the fault lines along which their party will crumble and have decided to use them to their advantage. It is possible, in other words, that the inevitable could have been postponed until after this election cycle, but eventually it would have happened. The Clintons just accelerated the pace.

Not that you’re likely to hear this tale from anyone other than the two of us. As far as the mainstream folks go, they think that this is all about Bill’s appetites again. But they’re wrong, just as they’re wrong about the relative states of the two major parties.

Just like the financial gurus who think that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the “Chinese century,” simply because the American system has a few problems, but who never bother to notice that the Chinese system has its own, far more pronounced problems, the political gurus have determined that the ’08 election will be the Democrats election because the GOP is falling apart. If they ever bothered to look, they’d likely see that the Democratic Party too is crumbling, and that Bill and Hillary Clinton are happily swinging the sledgehammers.

## THE OBAMA PHENOMENA.

There’s no denying it and no ducking it. We failed to appreciate how successful Barack Obama would be in his quest for the presidency. He is hanging in there much better than we thought he would and for that we offer him our warm congratulations. In truth, however, we are still not sure that we get it.

Some of our failure is reminiscent of the apocryphal story about the liberal lady in New York who said that she could not understand how Ronald Reagan won the presidency since she didn’t know a single person who had voted for him. Like her, we are clearly out of touch with a large segment of the population, for we must admit that, between us, we don’t know anyone who is likely to vote for Mr. Obama.

Our other excuse, such as it is, is that we are, like all humans, creatures of habit. We find something that seems to work reasonably well and we apply it until it doesn’t work anymore. Sometimes we apply it even after it stops working. We look at Obama through the same eyes as we have viewed other politicians throughout our lives, but particularly since the events of 9/11. And although we see a man with an abundance of charisma, who is clearly intelligent, and who has been called personable and good looking by those who are better suited to address those characteristics than we, we also see a man with very little practical experience and a tendency to say things that reflect a serious lack of understanding about how the world works today and America’s role in it. And we can’t escape the conclusion that he will not last long in the race for the highest elected office in the land, particularly given the state of the world right now.

Clearly, though, we are mistaken. Obama has already exceeded our expectations. We are missing something. We have talked a great deal about it between ourselves and we think that a good part of what we are missing can, in a way, be described as a voting-behavior cascade. Like scientific informational cascades, or market cascades, a vote cascade is based on speculation and limited information and leads to a series of individual rational actions that nonetheless create an irrational bubble.

We have neither the time nor, frankly, the desire to expound on this idea, so we will close with another one – just a theory mind you, but an interesting one; one that dates to Plato’s disdain for democracy as a form of government, based on his view that the *demos* were not sufficiently educated to decide who shall rule, and that finds sustenance today in newer theories concerning the failure of the modern day public educational system to teach Americans to think critically about any subject that involves processing information from multiple inputs.

Like the above-mentioned “cascade” theory, we have neither the time nor the inclination to expound on this, this week. So we have decided to turn the matter over to the man who first identified and offered an in depth analysis of the consequences of the rise of the “mass man” to a dominant position of importance in the Western world’s political scheme, namely the great Spanish philosopher and social critic, Jose Ortega y Gasset, author of numerous tomes on Western society, but one of particular value in this quest of ours, his classic, *The Revolt of the Masses*.

Before beginning, it is important to understand that for Ortega y Gasset, “mass man” is not synonymous with “lower class.” The term, as he uses it, includes those men of all classes who have stopped thinking, who “demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort towards perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves.”

So here goes, a few excerpts from Ortega y Gasset as an explanation for the surge in Barack Obama’s popularity. Is he right? You decide. In any case, consider it food for thought.

It is not a question of the mass-man being a fool. On the contrary, today he is more clever, has more capacity of understanding than his fellow of any previous period. But that capacity is of no use to him; in reality, the vague feeling that he possesses it seems only to shut him up more within himself and keep him from using it. Once for all, he accepts

the stock of commonplaces, prejudices, fag-ends of ideas or simply empty words which chance has piled up within his mind, and with a boldness only explicable by his ingenuousness, is prepared to impose them everywhere. This is what in my first chapter I laid down as the characteristic of our time; not that the vulgar believes itself super-excellent and not vulgar, but that the vulgar proclaims and imposes the rights of vulgarity, or vulgarity as a right. The command over public life exercised today by the intellectually vulgar is perhaps the factor of the present situation which is most novel, least assimilable to anything in the past. At least in European history up to the present, the vulgar had never believed itself to have “ideas” on things. It had beliefs, traditions, experiences, proverbs, mental habits, but it never imagined itself in possession of theoretical opinions on what things are or ought to be – for example, on politics or literature. What the politician planned or carried out seemed good or bad to it, it granted or withheld its support, but its action was limited to being an echo, positive or negative, of the creative activity of others. It never occurred to it to oppose the “ideas” of the politician others of its own, nor even to judge the politician’s “ideas” from the tribunal of other “ideas” which it believed itself to possess....The necessary consequence of this was that the vulgar never thought, even remotely, of making a decision on any one of the public activities, which in their greater part are theoretical in character. Today, on the other hand, the average man has the most mathematical “ideas” on all that happens or ought to happen in the universe. Hence he has lost the use of his hearing. Why should he listen if he has within him all that is necessary? There is no reason now for listening, but rather for judging, pronouncing, deciding. There is no question concerning public life, in which he does not intervene, blind and deaf as he is, imposing his “opinions.”

But, is this not an advantage? Is it not a sign of immense progress that the masses should have “ideas,” that is to say, should be cultured? By no means. The “ideas” of the average man are not genuine ideas, nor is their possession culture. An idea is a putting truth in checkmate. Whoever wishes to have ideas must first prepare himself to desire truth and to accept the rules of the game imposed by it. It is no use speaking of ideas when there is no acceptance of a higher authority to regulate them, a series of standards to which it is possible to appeal in a discussion. These standards are the principles on which culture rests. I am not concerned with the form they take. What I affirm is that there is no culture where there are no standards to which our fellowmen can have recourse. There is no culture where there are no principles of legality to which to appeal. There is no culture where there is no acceptance of certain final intellectual positions to which a dispute may be referred. There is no culture where economic relations are not subject to a regulating principle to protect interests involved. There is no culture where aesthetic controversy does not recognise the necessity of justifying the work of art....

Under the species of Syndicalism and Fascism there appears for the first time in Europe a type of man who does not want to give reasons or to be right, but simply shows himself resolved to impose his opinions. This is the new thing: the right not to be reasonable, the “reason of unreason.” Here I see the most palpable manifestation of the new mentality of the masses, due to their having decided to rule society without the capacity for doing so. In their political conduct the structure of the new mentality is revealed in the rawest, most convincing manner; but the key to it lies in intellectual hermetism. The average man finds himself with “ideas” in his head, but he lacks the

faculty of ideation. He has no conception even of the rare atmosphere in which ideas live. He wishes to have opinions, but is unwilling to accept the conditions and presuppositions that underlie all opinion. Hence his ideas are in effect nothing more than appetites in words, something like musical romanzas....

If we leave out of question, as has been done in this essay, all those groups which imply survivals from the past—Christians, Idealists, the old Liberals—there will not be found amongst all the representatives of the actual period, a single group whose attitude to life is not limited to believing that it has all the rights and none of the obligations. It is indifferent whether it disguises itself as reactionary or revolutionary; actively or passively, after one or two twists, its state of mind will consist, decisively, in ignoring all obligations, and in feeling itself, without the slightest notion why, possessed of unlimited rights. Whatever be the substance which takes possession of such a soul, it will produce the same result, and will change into a pretext for not conforming to any concrete purpose. If it appears as reactionary or anti-liberal it will be in order to affirm that the salvation of the State gives a right to level down all other standards, and to manhandle one’s neighbour, above all if one’s neighbour is an outstanding personality. But the same happens if it decides to act the revolutionary; the apparent enthusiasm for the manual worker, for the afflicted and for social justice, serves as a mask to facilitate the refusal of all obligations, such as courtesy, truthfulness and, above all, respect or esteem for superior individuals....

The contemporary State is the easiest seen and best-known product of civilisation. And it is an interesting revelation when one takes note of the attitude that mass-man adopts before it. He sees it, admires it, knows that

there it is, safeguarding his existence; but he is not conscious of the fact that it is a human creation invented by certain men and upheld by certain virtues and fundamental qualities which the men of yesterday had and which may vanish into air tomorrow. Furthermore, the mass-man sees in the State an anonymous power, and feeling himself, like it, anonymous, he believes that the State is something of his own.

Suppose that in the public life of a country some difficulty, conflict, or problem presents itself, the mass-man will tend to demand that the State intervene immediately and undertake a solution directly with its immense and unassailable resources. This is the gravest danger that to-day threatens civilisation: State intervention; the absorption of all spontaneous social effort by the State, that is to say, of spontaneous historical action, which in the long run sustains, nourishes, and impels human destinies. When the mass suffers any ill-fortune or simply feels some strong appetite, its great temptation is that permanent, sure possibility of obtaining everything- without effort, struggle, doubt, or risk- merely by touching a button and setting

the mighty machine in motion. The mass says to itself, "L'Etat, c'est moi," which is a complete mistake. The State is the mass only in the sense in which it can be said of two men that they are identical because neither of them is named John. The contemporary State and the mass coincide only in being anonymous. But the mass-man does in fact believe that he is the State, and he will tend more and more to set its machinery working on whatsoever pretext, to crush beneath it any creative minority which disturbs it- disturbs it in any order of things: in politics, in ideas, in industry. The result of this tendency will be fatal. Spontaneous social action will be broken up over and over again by State intervention; no new seed will be able to fructify. Society will have to live for the State, man for the governmental machine. And as, after all, it is only a machine whose existence and maintenance depend on the vital supports around it, the State, after sucking out the very marrow of society, will be left bloodless, a skeleton, dead with that rusty death of machinery, more gruesome than the death of a living organism. Such was the lamentable fate of ancient civilisation.

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