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### THEY SAID IT

Barely a twelvemonth after  
The seven days war that put the world to sleep,  
Late in the evening the strange horses came.  
By then we had made our covenant with silence,  
But in the first few days it was so still  
We listened to our breathing and were afraid.  
On the second day  
The radios failed; we turned the knobs, no answer.  
On the third day a warship passed us, headed north,  
Dead bodies piled on the deck. On the sixth day  
A plane plunged over us into the sea. Thereafter  
Nothing....

Edwin Muir, "The Horses."

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## IMMANENTIZING THE OBAMIC ESCHATON.

Over the past several weeks, as the inevitability of Hillary Clinton's nomination has dissolved, political commentators of all stripes have begun looking a little more closely at the man who now appears positioned to beat her out for the Democratic Party's presidential nod this fall. Although we are not yet convinced that Obama is inevitable, we agree that it might be time to take a little more in-depth look at the man who would be president and the effects that his prospective presidency would likely have on the nation.

Now, if we had to sum up the prevailing impression of the Obama campaign among conservative commentators in two sentences, they would be these, penned recently by Thomas Sowell: "Barack Obama says that he wants to 'heal America and repair the world.' One wonders what he will do for an encore and whether he will rest on the seventh day."

Obama's campaign is unique, no question. It is messianic. It is Millenarian. It is self-referential, bordering on self-absorbed. It is, as more than one commentator has noted, more than a little bit creepy, both in its narcissism and in the effect it has on many of its supporters. There has been a documented string of fainting attacks at Obama rallies over the last couple of months. Former Tip O'Neil aide and current MSNBC "news" host Chris Matthews said last week that Obama's speeches give him a "thrill going up his leg." Even some of Obama's most ardent supporters understand that they're involved in something just a wee bit shudder-inducing. Consider, for example, Joel Stein, a liberal and an avowed Obama supporter, who nonetheless wrote the following last week in a piece entitled "The Cult of Obama":

You are embarrassing yourselves. With your "Yes We Can" music video, your "Fired Up, Ready to Go" song, your endless chatter about how he's the first one to inspire you, to make you really feel something – it's as if you're tacking photos of Barack Obama to your locker, secretly slipping him little notes that read, "Do you like me? Check yes or no." Some of you even cry at his speeches. If I were Obama, and you voted for me, I would so never call you again.

Obamaphilia has gotten creepy. I couldn't figure out if the two canvassers who came to my door Sunday had taken Ecstasy or were just fantasizing about an Obama presidency, but I feared they were going to hug me . . .

In the "Yes We Can" music video that will.i.am made of Obama's Jan. 8 speech, I spotted Eric Christian Olsen, a very smart actor I know. (His line is "Yes we can.") I called to see if he had gone all bobby-soxer for Obama, or if he was just shrewdly taking a part in a project that upped his Q rating.

Turns out Olsen not only contributed money, he volunteered in Iowa and California and made hundreds of calls. He also sent out a mass e-mail to his friends that contained these lines: "Nothing is more fundamentally powerful than how I felt when I met him. I stood, my hand embraced in his, and . . . I felt something . . . something that I can only describe as an overpowering sense of Hope." That's the gayest e-mail I've ever read, and I get notes from guys who've seen me on E!

In one sense, Obama's candidacy is the standard left wing, "progressive," utopian kind of bunk that normal Americans have been running from for roughly a century now. He's going to bring "change" and make the world a better place, blah, blah, blah. Just like Bill Clinton, Michael Dukakis, Walter Mondale, Jimmy Carter, George McGovern, Hubert Humphrey, and all the rest before him.

But in another sense, Obama's campaign is distinctive, at least in the post-Reagan era. Like many leftists before him, including Karl Marx, he seems to favor the belief that profane history is moving toward some pre-determined axiological or utopian end point and that he has a personal role in this progression. Eric Voegelin described this as a "theoretical fallacy," famously labeling it as "the immanentization of

the Christian eschaton." But unlike other leftists, Obama seems to be trying to inject Christianity into this secular-liberal version of the Christian idea of transcendental fulfillment.

In other words, he liberally mixes liberal utopianism with promises to "save souls" and "fix souls" and to "heal" the "broken nation." Unlike most of the Baby Boomer liberals who abhor Christianity, Obama embraces it wholeheartedly, even if the version of it that he embraces is overtly and assertively Millenarian. Strangely enough, the media and the political left shriek in horror every time a Republican mentions God, but when one of their own does it, they get all doughy-eyed and weak-kneed and get thrills running up their legs. Creepy indeed.

Of course, all, or at least most of this is becoming part of the standard conservative criticism of Obama. By now, it's pretty clear that the guy views himself as a truly transformational figure and that both he and his supporters appear to attribute to him an ubermensch-ish stature. We are not, by any stretch of the imagination, the only ones to have noticed this.

But what does all of that mean? How will this bizarre self-reverence translate into policy, should Obama beat the odds and win the White House? When St. Barack of Chicago remakes the world, will it be better, or unexpectedly worse?

Unfortunately, we think it is far more likely that Obama will make things worse, far worse, both domestically and internationally. Not that he'll do so intentionally, mind you. But as is generally the case with those who promise to heal and fix and save and remake, he would simply be unable to do any of those things, in large part because they are beyond both the purview and the ability of the state.

Much has been made of the fact that Obama has compared himself to Ronald Reagan, promising a "transformative" and truly historic presidency. We'd be more inclined to bet on Jimmy Carter providing a reasonable and accurate comparison. Like Carter, Obama promises that which he simply cannot deliver. Like Carter, he disguises his political radicalism with

the soothing language of traditionalism and religion. Like Carter he has a brilliant plan to take the White House, but no serious plan to govern once he does. And last, like Carter, Obama appears naively to believe that the strength of his convictions, the passion of his beliefs, and the power of his personality can make the improbable probable and the impossible possible. This is, to put it bluntly, a recipe for disaster.

Last week, Obama revealed his long-awaited and much-anticipated economic plan. And the reaction was, well, expected. Obama is a standard, run-of-the-mill liberal. And his economic ideas are standard, run-of-the-mill liberal fantasies. Same old same old. Tax the rich, feed the poor, 'til there are no rich no more. Obama promises some \$800 billion in new spending, coupled with higher taxes on "the wealthy" and on capital. He plans more regulation and less free trade. He is, in other words, the anti-Reagan.

What is most troubling, however, is that for sheer, unadulterated treacherous naïveté, Obama's domestic plans pale in comparison to what we know of his foreign policy plans.

Take for instance, what we can infer about Obama's plans for action/inaction in the Middle East. He has already promised to remove U.S. troops from Iraq and to invade a sovereign ally in possession of nuclear weapons. But beyond these basic plans, he and his campaign have been quite opaque about their overall strategy, and have been hoping that Americans haven't been paying very close attention to anything but the campaign process.

Last week, for example, Obama's foreign policy guru made a special trip to Damascus to prostrate himself in front of the junior mass murderer of the region, Boy Assad. Let us note, for starters, that this "guru" is likely to be Secretary of State in an Obama administration. Let us note as well that this will be a promotion for him, since he last served in the government as National Security Advisor – to *President Carter*. This "guru," Zbigniew Brzezinski, was one of the least effective NSA's in recent memory, was responsible for planning the disastrous Operation Eagle Claw (the unsuccessful rescue attempt of the hostages

in Iran), and was the driving force behind cutting ties with Taiwan in favor of détente with the People's Republic of China. Zbig has been highly critical of the Bush foreign policy, particularly with regard to Iraq, and as recently as last fall was arguing that the United States should enter into a dialogue with Hamas. And last week, he was in Syria.

According to Zbig, he was there for discussions with Boy Assad because the United States and Syria have, in Zbig's words, a "shared interest in stability in the region." In an interesting twist, while Zbig was sharing his interests with Boy Assad in Damascus, Islamic terrorist archetype Imad Mughniyeh was being blown up in the streets of the same city. And who was Imad Mughniyeh? We'll let British journalist Con Coughlin explain:

Mughniyeh might not have been either as famous or as glamorous as the other terrorist masterminds of his generation, but in terms of achieving his ultimate objective of spreading terror throughout the civilian population, he was without peer. One of the more chilling aspects of Mughniyeh's legacy of violence was the introduction of the suicide bomber as an effective terrorist tool.

With suicide bombings these days almost a daily occurrence throughout the Middle East, whether in Baghdad or Israel, it is easy to forget that the suicide bomber is a relatively recent addition to the region's battle-scarred landscape.

The first time the concept of the suicide bomber really impinged on the West's consciousness was on April 18, 1983, when Mughniyeh arranged for a Hizbollah volunteer to drive a truck laden with explosives into the American embassy in Beirut.

Among the 60 people killed when the building was reduced to rubble were an estimated 20 CIA officers at a special regional conference. Not only had

Mughniyeh demonstrated his ability to conduct major terror operations, but the timing of the attack meant that the CIA suffered the single most devastating loss of personnel in its history.

Mughniyeh went on to develop kidnapping as an effective terrorist tactic. The abduction of scores of Westerners - including the British hostages Terry Waite and John McCarthy - together with the incessant suicide car bombings, which culminated in the destruction of the American and French military bases in Beirut with the loss of more than 300 lives in October 1983, resulted in the Americans undertaking a humiliating withdrawal of their forces from Beirut.

As head of security for Hizbollah, Mughniyeh's terrorist expertise was in great demand, and his trademark suicide truck bomb was employed to devastating effect in the bombings in Buenos Aires of the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community centre (1994), the attack on the US military compound in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia (1996) and the suicide bomb attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Tanzania (1998).

Now, according to various sources, including *The Times* of London, Mughniyeh had emerged from his hideout in Iran to plan an attack on Israel, with aid and support of both the Iranian regime and Boy Assad, with whom Zbigniew Brzezinski shared pleasantries and common interests – indeed, he was planning his attack while Zbig was caring and sharing with Assad. We're not sure how such an attack might fit into the Obama foreign policy paradigm. But we are sure that he and his foreign policy team would be awfully naïve if they thought that this was the only such attack against Americans and American allies planned in and paid for by Syria.

As for Iraq, which, as we noted above, is one place from which Obama wants U.S. troops removed,

here too the foreign policy is rich with naïvete. As we know, Obama wants the American troops out of Iraq, but wants to keep some of them in the region to “carry out targeted strikes” against al Qaeda or any other terrorist entity that sets up shop in the newly vacated country. This may sound like a wonderful idea, but it too is based on naïve, regressive thinking. As journalist Michael Totten has pointed out, the idea of targeted strikes has been explicitly disavowed by the new counterinsurgency strategy currently being employed with great success in Iraq. Targeted strikes proved woefully ineffective previously in Iraq and equally, if not more, ineffective during Israel's incursion into Lebanon a year-and-a-half ago. Totten writes:

Targeted strikes do kill some terrorists (and often, tragically, civilians, as well). But they have little or no effect overall in counterinsurgent urban warfare. Perhaps the senator or his advisors should read the new counterinsurgency manual – the one that has proven effective – and compare its strategy to targeted strikes which have proven to fail.

He then proceeds to quote from the Petraeus counterinsurgency manual (“Counterinsurgency/FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5”):

1-149. Ultimate success in COIN [Counter-insurgency] is gained by protecting the populace, not the COIN force. If military forces remain in their compounds, they lose touch with the people, appear to be running scared, and cede the initiative to the insurgents. Aggressive saturation patrolling, ambushes, and listening post operations must be conducted, risk shared with the populace, and contact maintained . . . These practices ensure access to the intelligence needed to drive operations. Following them reinforces the connections with the populace that help establish real legitimacy.

Of course, Obama can presumably deny that the change in counterinsurgency tactics is worth considering, given that he and the rest of his party still deny that the change has produced results in Iraq. But that should not make anyone feel any more secure about the likelihood that the senator's plans will succeed. Indeed, it should suggest precisely the opposite, namely that in the interest of partisanship, he will commit himself readily to repeating the mistakes of the past. Totten compares the "mistakes" planned by Obama with those made by the Israeli Defense Forces in Lebanon in 2006. The one difference being that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert didn't have the option of implementing a Petraeus-like counterinsurgency. Obama does. Yet in the interests of winning over Democratic primary voters, he appears willing to refuse to utilize that option, which will likely produce tragic results.

When you take these examples and then add to them the other traces of information we have gleaned about Obama's foreign affairs influences – i.e. that his spiritual advisor (Rev. Jeremiah Wright) is an admirer and friend of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan; that he believes that the world's problems can be eased through discussion with terrorists and their state sponsors; and that he has, as we noted last week, personal and perhaps familial relationships with African leaders purportedly aligned with Islamist groups – it becomes clear that an Obama presidency would seek to implement a far less aggressive foreign policy and one based less on defeat of the nation's enemies than negotiation with them. Some voters may find that prospect enticing. We don't, needless to say.

We would argue that none of this should surprise anyone. After all, he has, in his campaign rhetoric, made it clear that he is incredibly naïve, incredibly unconcerned about the sordid history of utopian promises, and incredibly enamored with his own ability to do things that are considered by most people to be naïve or impossible. Is it any wonder that he would embrace policy positions that would all but certainly fail, just as they have failed in the past? Yet, the cold hard fact is that most voters are most certainly unaware that these are the implications of the rhetoric that so enthalls them.

Up to this point in the campaign, Obama has been vague about his actual policy positions on various issues and even more vague about what effect he believes that those positions will have on the nation. We think we understand why. If he were to focus on the policies, it is likely that they would be dissected and dismantled by scholars, journalists, and political opponents. If, however, he keeps the focus on himself rather than his policy, he can still plausibly make the claim that he is the single variable that will make the previously unsuccessful policies successful this time around. As *The American Prospect's* Ezra Klein put it:

Obama's finest speeches do not excite. They do not inform. They don't even really inspire. They elevate. They enmesh you in a grander moment, as if history has stopped flowing passively by, and, just for an instant, contracted around you, made you aware of its presence, and your role in it. He is not the Word made flesh, but the triumph of word over flesh, over color, over despair.

And who could argue with that? And who would want to?

## WHO KNOWS WHAT THE HERD KNOWS?

To hear Mrs. Clinton tell it, there is no rational explanation for the admiration that so many Americans appear to have for Barack Obama. She maintains that she has spelled out in detail many well-defined plans to make the nation and the world a better place and has the political moxie necessary to see that these plans are implemented. He, on the other hand, according to Mrs. Clinton, has offered little more than a few aphorisms about "change," and has limited political experience. Yet, many Americans prefer him to her. Go figure.

Now, we cannot speak for the folks whose fondness for Mr. Obama so mystifies Mrs. Clinton, since, as we have noted before in these pages, we don't know anyone who plans to vote for him, much less anyone

who would be willing to explain to us what they find attractive about him. Nevertheless, she raises an interesting question that provides an excellent vehicle for speculating a little on several aspects of this campaign that we find noteworthy. So here goes.

For starters, we believe that boredom is one of the principal reasons why Obama's promise of "change" appeals to a great many Americans even though they don't have the faintest notion what he would actually change if elected

Politics has become one of the leading forms of spectator entertainment in the United States, rivaling professional sports and celebrity vulgarity, and the public is simply tired of the Clintons and the Bushes occupying center stage. Yes, they have been fun to watch, but 20 years is a long time. Done there, been that.

So, how about a new series featuring a young, black guy who smoked a little dope as a kid and talks like Coleridge wrote when he was in the midst of one of his opium highs? "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan A stately pleasure-dome decree...." And let's make the antagonist an aging, outspoken, highly volatile, political maverick, war hero who spent five years being tortured in a filthy Asian prison camp and whose enemies say he's a few bricks short of a stack and could come unwound and blow up the world at any time without notice? Now, *that* would add some excitement to the new fall season.

A second, related reason why so many Americans appear to have no qualms about taking a flyer on an unknown candidate with a lot of charisma and little experience over a well-known harpy who has been in more political fights than Harold Stassen is that the overwhelming majority of Americans are exceedingly comfortable right now. They have nothing to lose. Zero risk. It's like making a \$2 show bet on a horse.

Yes, Americans are, as a group, neurotic, fraught with anxieties, living, breathing arguments for adding Prozac to the drinking water along with the fluoride. But they are *comfortable* neurotics. Most of their troubles are all in their heads, so to speak. In

comparison to all other human beings in the entire history of mankind, no citizens of any civilization have ever had it as good as Americans have it today. They have an unprecedented abundance of wealth, health, security, equality, leisure time, amusements, freedom, and yes, peace of mind.

Relative to this latter claim, Americans are so bereft of realistic and tangible fears that they have had to make up new ones out of whole cloth, as the saying goes, ones that no rational human being has ever before even considered, much less worried over.

"The world is growing warmer. Oh woe is me! Florida will disappear. And the polar bears too. My Lord, what will we do without polar bears?" One goofy celebrity suggested that the globe could be saved from disaster if Americans would limit their use of toilet paper to one square per defecation. No word yet whether she will get a Nobel Prize for that insight although she is rumored to be spending a lot more nights alone than she used to.

Even the four horsemen of the apocalypse, who have haunted humankind since Hector was a pup are no longer capable of sowing the kind of fear that they once did, at least among Americans. Modern medicine and agricultural techniques, along with a Fed with a printing press on steroids, have hobbled the black horse of pestilence, famine, and poverty. A massive, all volunteer military has done the same to the red horse of war, as have the glories of democracy to the white horse of conquest. Modern day Americans still fear the pale horse of death, but, from all accounts, fewer and fewer fear being punished in the afterlife for their actions in this one, which has, one can assume, considerably reduced the dread that most of their forefathers once had of dying. One is reminded of Omar Khayyam's assurance to those who "talk of some strict testing of us," that they need not worry for "He's a good fellow, and 'twill all be well."

But widespread, blissful ignorance of the world around them is probably the most important reason that so many Americans could comfortably vote for a young, relatively inexperienced man about whom they know very little and who is not wont to discuss

his plans. We are not, repeat not, saying that only dumb people would vote for Barack Obama. We are saying that Obama recognizes that a substantial number of Americans are what Russell Kirk used to call “nominally ignorant,” and has tailored his message accordingly. Hillary offers details of her health care plan. Barack tells them how good they’re going to feel. She would starve to death selling pots and pans at the State Fair. He would thrive.

Now one can quibble about the adequacy of the phrase “nominally ignorant,” to describe what is actually happening to the intellectual health of the American public, but we believe that the underlying premise is inarguable, that being that the “dumbing down” of America is not a matter of simple conjecture. Indeed, we would note that it has been affirmed by many studies over the years, beginning with one published by the U.S. Department of Education itself in April 1983, which noted the following.

We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people...If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.

Now, as we’ve said before in these pages, it is worth keeping in mind that this study was published 25 years ago. So, if one assumes that the mediocrity that it bemoans preceded the publication of the report by, say, ten years (which is about right for government work), then it would seem safe to say that the American educational system has been on a downhill spiral for at least the past 35 years, or close to two generations, given that there is no evidence whatsoever that any improvement has been made since 1983 and that there is considerable evidence to the contrary.

Indeed, it has become a commonplace over the past few decades to see reports and studies containing such revelations as the fact that large percentages of the students from the lowest grade up to college level do not know who fought in World War II or when it occurred, cannot find their home state on a map, cannot perform simple math problems, have no knowledge of literature beyond references they have stumbled upon by watching television or going to the movies, and would have great difficulty composing a short, grammatically correct essay on virtually any topic.

Conventional wisdom holds that the principal negative consequence of the failing public education system is that the nation will become progressively more unable to compete in the global marketplace. This is clearly a problem. But frankly, we doubt that the United States will ever suffer too badly from the lack of highly skilled individuals to keep the nation at the higher end of the competitive scale.

If nothing else, the deterioration of the public school system has spawned a growing number of excellent private schools. In addition, corporate America spends millions annually to educate and train individuals to perform the chores necessary to “compete.” And, of course, the United States will continue to import highly talented people from abroad. Even the most aggressive anti-immigrationists do not seem to object to letting “those with the skills we need” enter the country.

Our fears are of a different nature. The first is a very practical concern that the United States is becoming increasingly incapable of responding with wisdom and the kind of determination that comes with wisdom to the growing number of complex threats to their nation and to their society, both external and internal, ranging from how to deal with pressing security matters to how to maintain a balance between prudent fiscal policy and the demands of a culture steeped in the material and the sensate to how to choose their political leaders.

Part and parcel of this fear is the painfully obvious fact that most of the nation’s political leaders are

themselves victims of the long and disastrous decline in the nation's public educational system, and, whether as a consequence of coincidence, rely ever more heavily for guidance by polling a population in which a growing number of individuals have little if any knowledge of history, which they might use to make reasonable judgments about foreign policy matters; little if any knowledge of economics, which they might use to make reasonable judgments about issues concerning taxes and spending policies; little if any knowledge of the workings of government, which they might use to make reasonable judgments about the proper role of the federal establishment; and little if any knowledge of literature and the arts, which would supply them insights into human nature which in turn would be useful in determining the consequences of any number of foreign and domestic policy proposals.

Our second and equally serious concern is the herd mentality that is being baked into the public psyche by the educational system's intentional determination to stifle any thoughts and opinions that are out of step with the latest politically correct dogma or fad, and its institutionalized apathy toward superior performance and potential in deference to the needs of the mediocre and the sub par.

We must admit that a fickle public with the instincts of a herd of cattle in a lightning storm, increasingly divorced from either wisdom or principles, makes elections and discussions about the eventual fate of the nation interesting.

Nietzsche was particularly fascinated by the effects of the social leveling and consequent herd mentality that socialism was imposing on the Europe of his day. He speculated that one result might be that, in the words of Karl Löwith, "the government of the world will fall into the hands of the 'mediocre.'"

But, Löwith notes, Nietzsche was more inclined to believe that the mediocrity would open the way for a powerful individual to take advantage of the ignorance

and resultant gullibility of the people to convince them to exchange their freedoms for the tantalizing security of a totalitarian order.

Nietzsche's term for this individual was, of course, the *übermensch*, sometimes translated as the "superman" or the "overman," whose task it would be to give a goal to the existence of the herd-men of democracy. According to Löwith, in a posthumous note, Nietzsche states that Zarathustra's hatred for the democratic system of leveling is "only a front." In reality, Nietzsche said, he is pleased that the world has finally "come so far," for only now can he carry out his task, namely the education of a master cast. Löwith continues as follows, paraphrasing and quoting Nietzsche:

The same conditions which further the development of the herd-animal also further the development of the leader-animal. Referring to Napoleon and Bismarck, Nietzsche said: "A man who has developed and preserved a strong will, together with a great spirit, has better prospects than ever before. For in this democratic Europe, the capacity of men to submit to training has become very great. Men who learn easily, who submit easily, are the rule . . . Whoever can command will find those who must obey." . . . Like Napoleon, they will be men of the people, and at the same time, stand above them in absolute self-confidence, as lawgivers and men of violence both. Under their leadership, the laboring masses will learn to feel like soldiers and carry out their orders. . . . The new masters of the earth shall "replace God" for the unbelieving masses.

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