

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

For it is not always when things are going from bad to worse that revolutions breakout. On the contrary, it oftener happens that when an oppressive rule over a long period without protest suddenly finds the government relaxing its pressure it takes up arms against it. Thus the social order overthrown by a revolution is almost always better than one immediately preceding it, and experience teaches us that generally speaking the most perilous moment for a bad government is when it seeks to mend its ways. Patiently endured so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men's minds.

Alexis de Toqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, 1856.

In this Issue

Barack Obama as Run-of-the-Mill
Leftist.

Will History End Again?

BARACK OBAMA AS RUN-OF-THE-MILL LEFTIST.

Over the past couple of weeks, there has been considerable discussion among conservative pundits and analysts of two peripheral developments in the presidential race. The two are related and both involve Barack Obama, sort of.

The first of these was the declaration two weeks back by Obama's wife, Michelle, that Barack's candidacy represents the first time in her adult life that she has been proud of her country. The second was a widely read, widely discussed, widely linked column by the *Asia Times'* well-regarded, anonymous columnist "Spengler," addressing Mrs. Obama's speech and how it relates to her political ideology, Barack's political ideology, and the influence that Barack's mother, the Wichita-raised anthropologist Ann Dunham, had on her son and his wife.

According to Spengler, who is unquestionably playing armchair psychologist and extrapolating quite heavily based on limited information, Barack Obama hates America and, in fact, learned his hatred from his mother, or to use Spengler's words, "imbibed hatred of America with his mother's milk." Proof of this hatred can be found, according to Spengler, in Dunham's work, in her rejection of her native land and its people, in her son's education and upbringing, in Michelle Obama's statements and undergraduate thesis, and in the way the Senator and would-be president interacted with and learned from the women in his life.

Now, we tend to agree with many commentators that Spengler has taken some rather significant causal leaps here and that his conclusions are far too sweeping and one-dimensional. Yet, we, like others, must admit that his column raises some interesting and troubling points.

For our part, we don't think that Barack Obama hates the United States. We don't think that he would intentionally do anything to damage the nation. And we don't believe that he represents some sort of 5th Column within the country. We do, however, think that he suffers from many standard liberal pathologies that affect deeply the way in which he views the United States and its place in the world, and that these would almost certainly affect his presidency, if he were to be elected.

For starters, we don't think that when Michelle Obama said that Barack's candidacy represents the first time in her adult life that she has been proud of her country that that necessarily means that she detests the country. We don't think she even realized that what she was saying might be construed as insulting. We believe that she, like her husband and countless other liberals, simply assumed that America's "less-than-proud" history is common knowledge and thus open for discussion.

As various commentators have noted, what the Obamas appear to suffer from is not America-hatred or even anti-Americanism, but a common leftist affliction known as "counter-tribalism." Counter-tribalism is a phrase that was coined in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks by the British-born journalist John O'Sullivan, the former editor of *National Review* and the current editor-in-chief of *United Press International* (UPI). O'Sullivan described the condition thusly:

Self-blame and a taste for complexity go very comfortably together to form something I call "counter-tribalism." This is a form of intellectual snobbery. A person in its grip has imbibed the notion that the patriotism of ordinary people is something simplistic, vulgar, and shameful, and thus to be avoided. He has been told that a genuinely sophisticated person — a university professor, say — has thrown off patriotic prejudice to become a citizen

of the world. Now, of course, genuine cosmopolitanism is an admirable thing, drawing upon wide cultural sympathies but perfectly compatible with a simple love of country, as the work of any number of poets demonstrates. It is accordingly very rare. So what the counter-tribalist mistakes for cosmopolitanism is an inverted jingoism — an instinctive preference for other nations and a marked prejudice that in any conflict the enemy of America is in the right.

Hence the extraordinary convolutions whereby feminists and multiculturalists find themselves taking the side of medieval Islamists against the common American enemy. They feel more comfortable in such superior company than alongside a hard-hat construction worker or a suburban golfer in plaid pants. But such preferences take some explaining. Hence not merely the taste for — but the absolute necessity of — complex explanations.

And all of this is in service of the notion of separating oneself from one's fellow citizens who are not sophisticated enough to rise above simple loyalties.

Listening to the Obamas talk about the country, talk about its failings, talk about Barack's refusal to wear a flag pin on his lapel, and talk about their unique ability to rise above these problems and bring reconciliation, unity, and progress, there can be little doubt that they are immersed in the counter-tribalism of the intellectual left. America has a hole in its soul, you know, and only Barack can fix it. American is a failed experiment, one that can be saved, but only if a savior is found. And Barack is the one we've been waiting for. He may come from modest means, but he is most definitely not like you or us or the "hard-hat construction worker" or the "suburban golfer in plaid pants." He is special.

The other problem that we believe afflicts the Obamas is a susceptibility to a belief in the myth of “the Golden Age” and the “idyllic state of nature.” This too is a common belief among the self-proclaimed intelligentsia of the West and is one of the oldest, most common, and most powerful sources of cynicism about the United States, about the West, and about the goals, intentions, and history of Western cultures. We discussed this Golden Age myth, the related devotion to the “noble savage,” and the effect that the two have had on Western civilization as follows in a piece published nearly two years ago:

In the opening line of *Emile*, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the intellectual forefather of the modern left, declared that “Everything is good in leaving the hands of the creator of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.” Rousseau’s critique of modern society and his lionization of pre-societal man are, perhaps, his most consistent themes. They are also his most powerful and far-reaching contributions to political philosophy.

In *The Second Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau argued forcefully that private property was the source of society’s ills. “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say this is mine, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.” More to the point, he argued that human existence in the absence of society and societal contrivances was far nobler . . .

In the 19th century this conception of savage man as ideal man was literalized, expounded upon, and eventually became a staple of the intellectual case against European imperialism. In the 20th Century, Rousseau’s intellectual heirs continued to romanticize primitive man, and, indeed, they made his inherent

righteousness a fundamental component of their self-loathing critique of Western society.

Much of the left’s attack on Western civilization is premised on the idea that the institutions of society – and Western society in particular – are inherently corrupting. The revolt against globalization, the neo-Luddite attack on modern technology (most especially the attack on the internal combustion engine), the squishy left’s fascination with organic foods and opposition to “genetically modified organisms,” “back to nature communalism,” the incessant degradation of America and American actions and motives, the unrelenting and ill-informed charges of economic exploitation and neocolonialism, and the irrational and brutal assault on Christianity are all, at least in part, underpinned by the idea that modern Western society is, by its very definition, corrupt and corrupting.

The natural outgrowth of this belief, of course, is the concomitant conviction that non-Western societies are, simply by virtue of being non-Western and non-Christian, less corrupt and therefore nobler.

You can see this contempt for Western man and the idealization of the noble, put upon “savage” in much of the leftist critique of the United States, the war in Iraq, and the broader war on terror. You can also see it in the influences on and policy positions of Barack Obama. Begin with Obama’s anthropologist mother, who, as Spengler notes, was described by friends as “a ‘fellow traveler’, that is, a communist sympathizer, from her youth, according to a March 27, 2007, *Chicago Tribune* report,” and who uprooted her son at age six and took him to Indonesia, into “the kitchen of anti-colonialist outrage, immediately following one of the worst episodes of civil violence in post-war history.”

Then finish with Barack's pride in having opposed the liberation of Iraq from the start; his insistence that the key to peace with the world's tyrants is to negotiate with and to understand them; his repeated calls for a summit with "all the heads of state" of the Muslim world to discuss how to bridge the gap between Islam and the West; his affiliation with a religious sect that eschews American-ness and lauds the enemies of Israel; and his purported embrace of pro-Palestinian positions, which he denies, but which many, many observers insist has long been the case.

What you are left with, then, is not a man who hates America, but one who believes that patriotism and overt love of country is beneath him and who also sympathizes with those who seek to oppose the corrupt and corrupting influence of the West. In short, you have your standard, run-of-the-mill, blame-America-first leftist, a stereotype, a man for whom time has not moved in nearly three-decades and who still believes the world would be a better place if it were less like America.

But if this is how Obama feels about his homeland and about its place in the world, then there are still a few questions that must be asked.

For starters, will this affect his electoral prospects? Will this necessarily disqualify him in the eyes of a majority of voters come November?

Those are difficult questions to answer. We should reinforce here the idea that in his beliefs about America, Barack Obama is a standard lefty. And, as such, he differs little from many others in his party, including, for example, Bill and Hillary Clinton. Recall that Bill was a draft-dodger; that Hillary was an unapologetic radical who worked on the Nixon impeachment, defended the Black Panthers, and was very close with many other true radicals; that they both "disdained" the military and even reportedly went so far as to try to keep military officers from riding in the car with Chelsea. Yet Bill was elected – twice. His sordid history and his wife's open radicalism didn't hurt him, or at least didn't hurt him enough to keep him from the Oval Office.

Of course, that was in 1992, when the Cold War was over and no one in the Western world had ever even heard of Osama bin Laden. Things are a little different today, and whether Obama knows it or not, his position on the war in Iraq, namely that we should never have gone there in the first place, offers very little by way of answer to the current question, which is whether the United States will leave this war as victor or as loser.

Generally speaking, when the nation is at war, anti-war, counter-tribalist leftism doesn't go over very well. In 1968 and 1972, the Republican presidential candidate won landslide victories and the Republicans picked up seats in the House. The country was still at war, you see, and the anti-war nonsense espoused by factions of the Democratic Party, including its presidential nominee in '72, alienated a great many voters.

Perhaps George McGovern could have won the White House had he run in '76, when the war was over. And perhaps Barack Obama could have won the White House had he run in 1992. But things will not be as easy for him in 2008 as they were for Bill in '92. Americans want to win the war, and, according to recent polls, a significant majority once again believe that the war in Iraq can and will be won. It will be awfully hard for Obama to convince them that it shouldn't be.

A second set of questions raised by Obama's formulaic leftism center on whether that leftism will do any serious, long-term damage to the nation should he manage to win the election in November. Again, we should stress that as far as we know, Obama does not hate this country and, given that, would be highly unlikely to do anything intentionally to damage the nation's capacity to defend itself and its standing in the world. The problem is that such damage has never been done intentionally, but it has been done nonetheless, and usually by well-meaning but naïve, overconfident, and counter-tribalist leftists.

Just as Carter exacerbated the world's problems by capitulating to Khomeini, by yielding to the Soviets, by forcing "peace" on the rightfully reluctant Israelis,

and by devastating the nation's foreign intelligence capabilities, so did Bill Clinton exacerbate the world's problems by drastically cutting the defense budget, by engaging the nation in wars of choice that amounted to little more than what Michael Mandelbaum called "foreign policy as social work," and by worrying more about legal technicalities than capturing or killing bin Laden and other terrorists. And so might Barack Obama exacerbate the world's problems by meeting with tyrants, invading Pakistan, and pulling American troops out of Iraq. We have little doubt that his heart would be in the right place. But good intentions do not necessarily make good policy, particularly when they are fueled by naïve, hopelessly idealistic, and historically ignorant ideological and political sentiments.

Over the past seven-plus years, we have heard far too much criticism of President Bush in which he stands accused of intentional sabotage, malignant motives, and downright evil. Such criticism is, of course, absurd. And we would caution our fellow conservatives not to fall into similar absurdity when critiquing Barack Obama. There is no good reason whatsoever to believe that he is out to destroy the nation or that he hates his country or wants desperately to see the United States "put in its place."

We do not think it particularly fair or particularly reasonable to question Obama's motives. At the same time, we do think it both fair and necessary to discuss and appraise his influences, his beliefs, and his ideological prejudices, all of which will help us to understand what he might do as president and how that might affect the country. And to this point, at least, we're not exactly sure that his motives matter much, since the outcome and potential damage to the country may well be the same, whether he intends them or not.

WILL HISTORY END AGAIN?

When the Cold War ended a decade-and-a-half ago, there were but a handful of Communist regimes that managed to ride out the proverbial storm and maintain control of their respective nations.

In Cuba, the Cult of Personality surrounding Fidel Castro and the attendant obsequiousness of many American liberals enabled that regime's survival. In North Korea, the Kims – regime founder, papa Kim Il Sung, and his creepy, boy successor, Kim Jong Il – managed to survive for two reasons. First, unlike their mistaken fellow travelers to the West, they never bought into the idea that political "reform" could satiate the demand for liberty while sparing the regime. Given that, they resisted any and all efforts at liberalization, or *perestroika* as the Soviets called it, and it worked. Second, their patron regime, the People's Republic of China, also survived, making it a great deal easier for them than it was for the Soviet satellites. How long Lil' Kim can last is anyone's guess, but it is fairly certain that he could not survive the fall of the current regime in China.

For their part the Chinese communists took a third course, incredibly risky, yet just as incredibly successful, so far at least. Like their North Korean comrades, the Chicoms ignored all calls for political reform and, in fact, slaughtered those who had the gall to stand up to the tanks in Tiananmen Square. At the same time, though, they introduced selective economic reforms, which, for the last fifteen-plus years have engaged the erstwhile restless population, diverting its attention toward the creation of wealth and away from the political institutions that traditionally underpin such wealth.

Nevertheless, the widespread collapse of Communism, despite these noted stragglers, prompted many scholars to try to explain how and why this collapse had been inevitable and how that inevitability could presage the future of geopolitics. The most famous of these was, of course, Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, which posited that nation-states were moving inevitably toward Western-style democracy, or as Fukuyama himself put it, toward

“the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

The intervening years have not been kind to Fukuyama’s thesis, particularly in the face of the rise of radical Islam. Nevertheless, Fukuyama, Ronald Reagan, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and the others who foresaw and explained the collapse of Marxism were absolutely right that political systems based on this ideology are inherently unstable and doomed to fail. And though few people want to believe this, it is becoming increasingly apparent to anyone paying attention that the collapse of the aforementioned three stragglers will eventually provide further proof of their foresight.

Needless to say, if this prediction is correct, there will be enormous ramifications both geopolitically and financially.

Consider, if you will the perilous situation in Cuba. Fidel has officially turned power over to his brother Raul. Many observers believe that since he has been unofficially in charge for some time now, very little will change. We believe they are wrong.

Raul has already made some personnel changes that are likely to disappoint many of his constituents, which, as any schoolboy knows, is a dangerous thing for a totalitarian dictator to do. This past weekend, Brian Lattel, a national intelligence officer for Latin America from 1990-1994 and the author of *After Fidel*, took to the pages of *The Wall Street Journal* to describe Raul’s conundrum:

Raul’s overriding priority is to secure his position by surrounding himself with trusted, tough, old veterans who, if necessary, could mobilize whatever firepower is needed to defend the new regime against popular unrest or a home-brewed cabal . . .

Raul’s second priority runs parallel to his first. The elevation of the disciplinarian

Mr. Machado signals his plan to strengthen the party. On his very first day in power, Raul stressed the need for order, discipline and unity. He will now depend on his old friend to take the lead in restructuring and reducing the number of government ministries and agencies, with the intent of making them more efficient and responsive to popular needs. In the process, additional leadership changes will be revealed.

However, Raul’s strategy runs up against a problem: None of his appointments appeal to the Cuban people . . .

The number and intensity of incidents reflecting their [the people’s] dissatisfaction has reached unprecedented levels. Recently, for example, two university students appeared in a video, probably leaked by disgruntled government functionaries. It showed the youths vociferously complaining to the startled president of the national assembly.

Ironically, this generational unrest is due in large measure to Raul’s earlier injunction to university students to debate Cuba’s problems “fearlessly.” He knows of course that Fidel would never have opened himself to such criticism, but continues to gamble that the grievances of Cuban youth can be assuaged. In his recent speech he said that Cuba “has been permanently opened to debate,” although he prudently insisted on the “importance of discipline.”

Raul is raising popular hopes by promising to decentralize the economy. He will likely begin by introducing limited market mechanisms in agriculture.

What this means then is that Raul is promising reform to a highly restive population. Yet, true economic reform is highly unlikely, given the corruption and comfort of the ruling class and the resistance of Cuba's biggest and most powerful neighbor. And as we have written many times before in these pages, the promise of good things to come, followed by the failure to deliver those goods, is a recipe for disaster.

History demonstrates that the point of greatest danger for a totalitarian regime is when its population comes to hold expectations that cannot be met, i.e., when people believe that that to which they are entitled is being kept or taken from them. This is what social scientists call "relative deprivation" or, more accurately, "perceived relative deprivation," which was most famously described by political scientist Ted Robert Gurr. In his 1970 classic *Why Men Rebel*, Gurr explained the concept as "a perceived discrepancy between men's value expectations and their value capabilities," and noted that, "societal conditions that increase the average level or intensity of expectations without increasing capabilities increase the intensity of discontent."

It is, given the conditions building in Cuba today, quite possible, if not likely, that Castro the Younger will be faced with a serious choice: either put down increasing restiveness with force; or cut his losses, take his Swiss bank account numbers and his brother's corpse and head for Zimbabwe, or wherever it is old tyrants run off to these days.

Now, it is possible, of course, that if he does, in fact, put down unrest with violence, he will be commemorated forever on t-shirts worn by trendy Americans and flags hung by Obama campaign workers, as has been the case with previous Cuban murderers. But it is just as possible that such violence will backfire and hasten the regime's end, perhaps even at the hands of the "international community." No one can say for sure. What one can say, though, is that Raul's position is likely far more perilous than most pundits and "analysts" will concede.

But Raul is not alone. His problems are news right now because of the circumstances of his official ascension to power. Yet he and his pals are hardly the only remnant Marxists embarking on an unusually perilous course of action. In China too, there are dark clouds on the Communist horizon, smog clouds in fact.

Two things have long been known by anyone who has paid even the remotest attention to China. First, its air and water pollution are unrivaled, a natural byproduct of both communism and the nation's rapid economic and industrial expansion. Second, the government wants desperately to make a good impression on the world with this summer's Olympic games and will do anything necessary to accomplish this.

Thus, we – or, more accurately, the Chinese – have a bit of a problem. You see, in order to make a good impression, China needs to get a handle on its pollution problems. But in order to do that, it has to make fundamental changes that will affect economic output, anger and punish a great many people, and, in general, stoke unrest.

So what have the Chicoms decided to do? Well, apparently they've decided to "temporarily" sacrifice growth and stability as part of an effort to clean up Beijing and its environs. Over the past several weeks, there have been car bans (forcing some million-plus cars off the road); shut downs of high-pollution factories and a related loss of jobs; and water diversion from drought-stricken areas to Beijing. No one knows the cost of this effort to clean up the environment, but it is becoming clear that it will have serious negative consequences in terms of economic growth, jobs, and foreign investment.

Again, what we have here is a potentially very serious problem. The Chinese economic boom has always been shakier than most Western analysts and investors have been willing to acknowledge. Financial markets thrive on transparency, and the Chinese regime is anything but transparent and anything but trustworthy. Add to this the brutal Chinese winter that has left

many homeless and/or despondent, massive inflation, and now the alienation and potential slowdown related to the Olympic “greening” process, and things could get ugly quickly.

In our opinion, the China-boom has always been something of a bubble. First tech, then housing, next China. That bubble will burst very loudly and rather ruinously if the Chinese people begin to grow even more alienated from their rulers. And as Professor Gurr noted nearly forty years ago, there is a good chance that such alienation, followed by general upheaval, could be the result of the diminished expectations that may follow the scenario detailed here. The Chinese people have grown accustomed to rapid growth, and many have grown accustomed to the wealth and opulence that growth has produced. Take that growth away – even slow it down modestly but noticeably – and the fate of this second Communist holdout could easily be the same as nearly all of its ideological fellow travelers.

What happens when official government numbers are proven to be false? What happens when the regime’s investments fail because the regime itself fails?

Naturally, such an outcome would roil global markets significantly. But no one really knows what happens when a creditor nation is thrown into political turmoil. Certainly we don’t. But it’s not entirely impossible that we will find out.

We have argued for years now that the Chinese Communists have simply been buying time and that eventually their winning streak would end. We have argued as well that those who have taken the word of the Chinese government and have invested heavily in that country are playing with fire and that the lack of transparency and the intrinsic instability of the regime would, over the long term, make China an unwise investment. Yes, there have been massive short-term profits, but one cannot help but wonder how massive the losses will be when this regime is forced to face the turmoil that will inevitably accompany the decision to take some pressure off the boiling pot of a society that is growing richer and more corrupt every day.

One thing you can bet on is that those giant financial companies that are most heavily committed in China will be the first to know when the breaking point has arrived and the last to tell their investors.

Copyright 2008. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved.

Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.