

**Mark L. Melcher** Publisher  
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

**Stephen R. Soukup** Editor  
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

## THEY SAID IT

Members of today's foreign policy establishment, Codevilla maintains, "did not spend their formative years worrying about how to maximize their country's power or studying the principles of international statecraft. After opposing the United States in Vietnam, they made their careers restraining, diminishing, denigrating American power, and arguing that power is not fundamental to world affairs."

"While they championed arms control agreements, they never got excited when the Soviet Union violated them. With few exceptions, they did not serve in the armed forces, and have scarce social contact and sympathy with those Americans who do. Hence neither in mind nor heart nor habit are they comfortable managing America's power for the sake of its interests, or calling forth the nation's martial instincts to defend its sacred values."

Angelo Codevilla, from *The National Interest*, Spring 1994.

## In this Issue

War and Peace.

Tom Friedman and the  
Hopeless Presidency.

## WAR AND PEACE.

Last week, Senator Joseph Lieberman wrote an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Democrats and Our Enemies" that began with two questions: "How did the Democratic Party get here?" And, "How did the party of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy drift so far from the foreign policy and national security principles and policies that were at the core of its identity and its purpose?"

Now our intention this week is not to answer Lieberman's questions. We have, after all, done this numerous times during past few years in a series of articles, all constructed around the phrase "the Democratic Party's descent into madness." We would instead like to offer a little historical background on the hawk vs. dove debate among and between the two parties, which we hope might provide a somewhat different and possibly useful perspective from which to watch the upcoming foreign policy debate between John McCain and Barack Obama.

We will begin by noting that Senator Lieberman is correct about his former party's hawkish history. His mistake was to put Franklin Roosevelt on the top of his list of U.S. Presidents who "forged and conducted a foreign policy that was . . . unafraid to make moral judgments about the world beyond our borders." The fact is that Woodrow Wilson has a much more legitimate claim to this arguably dubious honor. Wilson was, after all, blustering loudly about an American partnership with God in an effort to pacify the world when Roosevelt was still a pup working in the Navy Department.

We would further note that while Republicans appear to be the current standard bearer for a highly charged, morality-based brand of foreign policy, when Wilson was president they were as reluctant to become involved in such a venture as Lieberman accuses the Democrats of being today. Indeed, while one of the few things that conservatives like about Senator McCain is his aggressive, highly engaged foreign policy positions, this stance is as far from the foundational principles of 20<sup>th</sup> century American conservatism as the Democratic Party's current dovish position is from its own 20<sup>th</sup> century roots.

The post-World War I debate over American participation in the League of Nations provides the best insights into the nature of this circumstance. Wilson, who formulated the blueprint for the League himself and led the fight for it during the conference over the Treaty of Versailles, was convinced that the United States had a mandate from God Himself to help establish the League as a means of assuring that World War I would indeed be “the war to end war.” A great description of the determination behind this attitude can be found in *Presidential Anecdotes*, one of Paul F. Boller, Jr.'s many delightful and highly informative books on U.S. Presidents.

Wilson never doubted that he was a foreordained agent, “guided by an intelligent power outside himself,” with important work to do in the world [Lippman]. For him the League of Nations, his most famous enterprise, was not simply a human contrivance for ordering international relations; it represented God's will and, in rejecting it, the United States was trying futilely to resist its Providential destiny. As Wilson told some friends toward the end of his life: “I have seen fools resist Providence before, and I have seen their destruction . . . That we shall prevail is as sure as God reigns” [Edith Bolling Galt Wilson].

Citing Lloyd George's *Memoirs of the Peace Conference*, Boller offers the following humorous anecdote as

further evidence of Wilson's apparent belief that his interventionist foreign policy was a reflection of God's will.

It was part of the real joy of these conferences to observe [French Prime Minister Georges] Clemenceau's attitude toward Wilson during the first five weeks . . . If the President took a flight beyond the azure main, as he was occasionally inclined to do without regard to relevance, Clemenceau would open his great eyes in twinkling wonder, and turn them on me as much as to say: “Here he is off again.” . . . His [Wilson's] most extraordinary outburst was when he was developing some theme – I rather think it was connected with the League of Nations – which led him to explain the failure of Christianity to achieve its highest ideals. “Why,” he said, “has Jesus Christ so far not succeeded in inducing the world to follow His teaching in these matters? It is because He taught the ideal without devising any practical scheme to carry out his aims.” Clemenceau slowly opened his dark eyes to their widest dimension and swept them round the Assembly to see how the Christians gathered around the table enjoyed his exposure of the futility of their Master.

Boller then, once again, quotes Lloyd George, who sat between Wilson and Clemenceau throughout the conference, as saying the following: “I think I did as well as might be expected seated as I was between Jesus Christ and Napoleon Bonaparte.”

The leading conservatives of that day were a mixed and highly independent lot. Terry Teachout described them as follows in a review of historian Robert M. Crunden's compilation of essays by these teachers, authors, poets, essayists, and critics entitled *The Superfluous Men, Conservative Critics of American Culture*.

Here is the first generation of American conservative intellectuals, in all their uncomfortable glory: prickly, quirky,

unclubbably aristocratic and as individual as the idiosyncratic philosophies they espoused. Compassionate conservatives they most definitely weren't, and their angry anti-modernism has not yet lost its power to startle and provoke. For those short-sighted youngsters who think conservatism started with Ronald Reagan or Barry Goldwater – or even Bill Buckley – this admirably edited collection will supply a swift kick in the preconceptions.

Yet, while these conservatives did not see eye to eye on many issues, they all shared a deep suspicion of what then were commonly known as “foreign entanglements,” reflecting Washington’s warning in his Farewell Address that “a free people ought to be constantly awake” against “the insidious wiles of foreign influence . . . since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.”

Henry Cabot Lodge Sr. led the opposition to Wilson in the Senate. He outlined the *conservative* political view of U.S. involvement in grand efforts to achieve global peace by the collective action of all the nations of the world in a speech he gave in Washington on August 12, 1919, from which the following is excerpted.

You may call me selfish if you will, conservative or reactionary, or use any other harsh adjective you see fit to apply, but an American I was born, an American I have remained all my life. I can never be anything else but an American, and I must think of the United States first, and when I think of the United States first in an arrangement like this I am thinking of what is best for the world, for if the United States fails, the best hopes of mankind fail with it.

I have never had but one allegiance - I cannot divide it now. I have loved but one flag and I cannot share that devotion and give affection to the mongrel banner invented for a league. Internationalism, illustrated by the Bolshevik

and by the men to whom all countries are alike provided they can make money out of them, is to me repulsive . . .

We would have our country strong to resist a peril from the West, as she has flung back the German menace from the East. We would not have our politics distracted and embittered by the dissensions of other lands. We would not have our country’s vigour exhausted or her moral force abated, by everlasting meddling and muddling in every quarrel, great and small, which afflicts the world . . .

Lodge’s view of American involvement in the disputes of other nations was reinforced by some of the most brilliant political theorists in the United States of that time. Among them was Harvard Professor Irving Babbitt, who pushed strenuously against attempting to establish a “rein of virtue” throughout the world, arguing that the moralistic language that inevitably accompanies such projects is more often than not simply a mask used to cover political ambitions. He later summed up his feelings on this issue in his classic *Democracy and Leadership* as follows:

If we attend carefully to the psychology of the persons who manifest such an eagerness to serve us, we shall find that they are even more eager to control us . . . Let one consider again Mr. Woodrow Wilson, who, more than any other recent American, sought to extend our idealism beyond our national frontiers. In the pursuit of his scheme for world service, he was led to make light of the constitutional checks on his authority and to reach out almost automatically for unlimited power. If we refused to take his humanitarian crusading seriously we were warned that should “break the heart of the world” . . . The truth is that this language, at once abstract and sentimental, reveals a temper at the opposite pole from that of the genuine statesman . . .

The particular confusion of the things of God and the things of Caesar promoted by Mr. Wilson and the other “idealists” needs to

have brought to bear on it the second of the sayings of Jesus that I have cited (“By their fruits ye shall know them”). The idealists so plainly fail to meet the test of fruits that they are talking refuge more and more, especially since the war, in their good intentions. The cynic might, indeed, complain that they already have hell paved at least twice over with their good intentions. We can no more grant that good intentions are enough in dealing with men than we can grant that they suffice a chemist who is handling high explosives. Above all, no person in a position of political responsibility can afford to let any “ideal” come between him and a keen inspection of the facts.

Albert Jay Nock, one of the best-known conservatives of the day, was another among Wilson’s most vocal critics. He wrote and spoke extensively on the subject of conservatism’s opposition to meddling in foreign affairs. The following from an article entitled “An Exhausted Virtue,” published June 14, 1919 in *The Nation*, provides a brief insight into Nock’s views of the post-war peace conference at Versailles where Wilson was pushing his idea for a League of Nations.

Public patience with the Peace Conference is no longer patience, but a weak and degenerate pusillanimity. We hope that the Congress will at once cut the foundation out from under the whole intolerable situation by passing a resolution declaring summarily that the state of war is at an end, demanding the immediate withdrawal and demobilization of all our expeditionary forces, renouncing responsibility for further police duty in Europe, and authorizing the resumption of free commerce . . . It is well enough six months ago that the United States should take part in the Peace Conference instead of simply declaring its share in the war at an end and resuming its independent way. Mr. Wilson had been especially active in devising and publishing a whole series of high international ideals. This had its effect

upon the popular conscience and will. The country was full of naïve expectation that this was a war to end war, and that it was so intended by its fautors. This, we can now see, was a fantastic expectation, since war cannot possibly be ended by war, and those who promote war do not do so with any such purpose in view.

As any schoolboy knows, conservatives won this battle and continued right up until the beginning of World War II to oppose foreign adventurism. In fact, Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease Program was a direct result of successful conservative opposition to his efforts to get America involved in the Second World War, as is the famous conspiracy theory, which lingers even today, that Roosevelt knew in advance about the attack on Pearl Harbor and did nothing to stop it because he knew it would force conservatives to support his desire to go to war with Germany and Japan.

After the war, the Democrats continued their highly interventionist foreign policy posture. President Truman led the way. He assured U.S. participation in the United Nations. He launched the Marshall Plan. He announced the Truman Doctrine, which pledged that America would “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” He initiated America’s policy of “containment,” which lay the groundwork for the Cold War. He helped to create three international pacts under which the United States agreed that an attack against any signators of the pack would be considered an attack against the United States, which placed under U.S. protection all of the members of NATO (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, the U.K., Canada, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark and Iceland), all of the members of SEATO (Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Great Britain), and all of the members of CENTO (Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Great Britain). And, of course, he went to war in Korea.

There were a small number of conservatives around who questioned whether the United States should commit itself so heavily to affairs of so many other

nations. But they had neither the political clout nor the collective will to stand against the rising tide of public support in favor of a vast, global confrontation with Communism. Indeed, five years after the end of World War II, such was the state of conservatism in America that Lionel Trilling made the following observation in his book *The Liberal Imagination*.

In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.

More recently, looking back on this period, conservative publisher Henry Regnery confirmed Trilling's observation as follows:

Liberalism reigned supreme and without question; the Liberal could believe, in fact, that no other position was conceivable. The war, which represented the triumph of good over evil, had been won. Fascism, militarism and colonialism had been banished from the earth; the Peace-Loving Nations, joined together in San Francisco in a perpetual bond, would preserve peace, protect the weak, and guarantee the rule of democracy – the future seemed assured. It was a beautiful picture and questions about its conformity to the facts of life were not welcome.

President Eisenhower was the only politician of national stature who seems to have recognized and called public attention to the dangers to traditional American society that accompanied this new role as a global force for good. Among the “grave

implications” that he feared was the establishment of a large, permanent military, supported by a industrial complex built solely for the purpose of providing weapons to this force. He stated his concerns this way in his last speech as President on January 17, 1961.

A vital element in keeping the peace is our military establishment. Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction. Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea.

Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

Needless to say, Americans were much less interested in Eisenhower's cautionary note than they were with Jack Kennedy's Wilsonian-like pledge, delivered just three days later in his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any

hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty,” not just in the good old U.S. of A., but worldwide. To wit:

To those peoples in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required – not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

The result was a two-decades long political battle between the two parties in which neither side had any interest at all in advocating a cautionary stance toward U.S. involvement in foreign entanglements.

In August 1968, a group of radical Democratic “peaceniks” staged a successful revolt at the Democratic Convention in Chicago against the nomination of Hubert Humphrey, arguably one of the last of the old Cold War Democratic hawks. From that point on, the Democratic Party adopted a decidedly more dovish, approach to foreign policy, mixed with some odd Wilsonian overtones.

Charles Krauthammer eventually described it as the “Anthony Lewis school of foreign policy,” named after the now retired, uber-liberal *New York Times* columnist, according to which U. S. military action was only justified if no national interests were involved.

George Will explained it as follows: “Just as in domestic policy the proof of liberal virtue is generosity with other peoples’ money, the proof in foreign policy is willingness to spend the nation’s blood, treasure and prestige for abstractions rather than concrete national gain.”

Conservatives reacted by becoming advocates of a highly aggressive, internationalist foreign policy. They argued that their stance was a practical, hard-headed response to communist aggression and that the old, pre-World War II conservatives would have found their policies to be perfectly acceptable, since

they bore no resemblance whatsoever to the utopian, idealistic, ‘make the world safe for democracy,’ foreign policy that Wilson had bequeathed to FDR, Truman, and Jack Kennedy.

And for a while, they had very little trouble making this argument. Then, when the current Bush administration was embarrassed by the fact that it could find no evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after the invasion, President Bush and his then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice began to publicly argue that destroying these weapons was only one small part of the reason for the invasion; that the other, more significant purpose was to introduce democracy into the Middle East. And suddenly the Bush crowd started to sound very much like the Wilson crowd, which had been the bane of the pre-war conservatives.

Condi Rice led the way in August 2003 with a speech in which she, in the words of a reporter for the *Washington Post*, “made a broad pledge to spread democracy and free markets to the Middle East, promising to move beyond the recent focus on Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in an ambitious but vaguely defined project to transform a troubled region.”

Ms. Rice went on to describe those who disagree with her grandiose plans to make a “generational commitment” of U.S. blood and money to the goal of “transforming” the Middle East into a group of a nation’s with “democratic values” as “condescending voices who allege that some people are not interested in freedom or aren’t ready for freedom’s responsibilities.”

She equated these people, or “voices,” with those who argued in favor of racial segregation during her childhood in Alabama. “That view was wrong in 1963 in Birmingham and it is wrong in 2003 in Baghdad and in the rest of the Middle East,” she said.

Reflecting our own conservative roots, we noted at the time, in these pages, that this was a “disgraceful charge that demeans both her and the Bush administration.” We continued as follows: “There is nothing racist, or

morally wrong about questioning whether it would be a good use of American resources to launch such an ambitious and expensive effort, even if one thought it could be done.”

Our position then and now is that a good part of the reason that the war in Iraq has continued to be unpopular, even as it has become ever more manageable, is that President Bush has, ever since Condi Rice made the above statement, tried to sell it to the American people not as a means of destroying an avowed enemy of this nation but as an exercise in some noble American crusade to make the world a better place by promoting Democracy and making life better for a bunch of Arabs about whom the average American cares not one whit. We put this thought this way in an article dated November 3, 2003 entitled “How Bush Could Lose The War In Iraq,” written three months after Ms. Rice’s declaration:

So the task ahead for the Bush administration, as we see it, involves convincing the American people once again that the battle over Iraq is directly – very directly – linked to American security. The argument that the enemy over there killed 20 American soldiers but that that is okay because the Iraqi people now have more electricity than they had when Saddam was running the place simply won’t sell. In fact, it’s an insult. We believe it is safe to say that the vast majority of Americans don’t give a damn whether the Iraqi people have electricity, or even candles for that matter, if the cost of providing them with this luxury is the life of a single American soldier.

To put this another way, we think the Bush administration will lose the war for the hearts and minds of the public unless it stops measuring “success” in Iraq by how many amenities we have been able to provide the Iraqis. There most assuredly is a long-term link between this accomplishment and American security. But it is not one that is easily explained to the American people while they are mourning the daily loss of lives among their sons and daughters.

Our advice to the Bush White House if we were asked, which we won’t be, would be to heat this conflict up. Stop talking about how good the “average” Iraqi has it now that Americans troops are there, because no one cares. Reestablish the direct link between the American military presence in Iraq and the goal of destroying a dangerous enemy. If the link is real, then Americans will understand and support the effort. If it is illusionary, or casual at best, then it is probably time to leave anyway.

So yonder comes an election featuring a discussion of war and peace between two candidates whose views on the subject are going to be characterized by the press as “conservative” and “liberal,” even though neither of the two candidates, nor any of those doing the characterizing, have any idea how one would today distinguish between a “liberal” foreign policy and a “conservative” one.

## TOM FRIEDMAN AND THE HOPELESS PRESIDENCY.

It’s not often that we read, much less comment on anything written by Tom Friedman, arguably *The New York Times*’ most famous and most popular columnist. It’s not that we have anything against Friedman. It’s just that there are so many good and insightful things to read these days, we can’t see spending our time on a placid synopsis of center-left conventional wisdom distinguished only by its Bush-esque syntactical awkwardness. Friedman may not yet be as bland and mechanical as, say, the *Washington Post*’s David Broder, but he’s close, and getting closer every day.

It is sort of ironic, then, that it was this characteristic triteness that drew us to Friedman’s offering from Wednesday of last week. In that piece, entitled “Imbalances of Power,” Friedman again conveys little more than the conventional wisdom. But in so doing, he makes a very clear and powerful, if unwitting, argument about the problems that this nation faces in the twenty-first century, about the problems that

conservatives and other Republicans face this year and in future election cycles, and about the reasons why so many Americans feel so strongly that the country is “on the wrong track,” despite continued incomparable prosperity and relative peace at home.

Friedman expresses thoughts here that in another time and in another place would be striking, or, at the very least, “unconventional.” Yet in context, they are perfectly ordinary and mundane. And that says volumes both about this nation’s elite political culture and about the mass political culture it apes. Friedman writes:

More and more, I am convinced that the big foreign policy failure that will be pinned on this administration is not the failure to make Iraq work, as devastating as that has been. It will be one with much broader balance-of-power implications – the failure after 9/11 to put in place an effective energy policy.

It baffles me that President Bush would rather go to Saudi Arabia twice in four months and beg the Saudi king for an oil price break than ask the American people to drive 55 miles an hour, buy more fuel-efficient cars or accept a carbon tax or gasoline tax that might actually help free us from what he called our “addiction to oil.”

The failure of Mr. Bush to fully mobilize the most powerful innovation engine in the world – the U.S. economy – to produce a scalable alternative to oil has helped to fuel the rise of a collection of petro-authoritarian states – from Russia to Venezuela to Iran – that are reshaping global politics in their own image.

As we said, to most people there is nothing particularly controversial about the sentiments expressed here. Bush screwed up (SHOCKER!); he should have waged

a war for “energy independence;” he didn’t mobilize the economy; he focused on the wrong things, etc., etc., etc.

This is depressing stuff, to say the least. Honestly, does anyone think Friedman has any idea what he is saying here, or, more to the point, the implications of what he is saying?

For starters, it is clear that the last four decades of social science research has had exactly zero effect on the elite opinion-makers, people like Friedman. The social sciences – economics, public policy, sociology, etc. – may not offer quite the certainty of the hard sciences, but there is unquestionably much that they can teach us. And in the last forty years, they’ve taught us quite a bit about human nature and what motivates people to act. They have taught us, in short, that people respond to incentives.

As early as the mid-1960’s, then-assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan noted the correlation between incentives and behavior. Persistent black poverty, Moynihan noted, was correlated to the dissolution of the black family; and the dissolution of the black family, in turn, was correlated to such things as Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

By the 1980s, among others, Charles Murray had built on Moynihan’s original work and had drawn the largely inescapable conclusion that government aid (i.e. welfare), had been a highly destructive force in the black community, responsible for incentivizing both the demolition and deligitimization of the black family and the related incidence and acceptance of single-motherhood.

In other words, it was clear that economically rewarding mothers who choose to raise children with no father present serves simply to encourage more mothers to raise children with no father present. It is no wonder then, as Kay Hymowitz put in a 2005 piece for *City Journal*, that “by 1980, 15 years after [Moynihan’s report,] ‘The Negro Family,’ the out-of-wedlock birthrate among blacks had more than



doubled, to 56 percent. In the ghetto, that number was considerably higher, as high as 66 percent in New York City.”

The same basic idea, that people respond to incentives, was the driving force behind the supply-side revolution of the last three decades. Incentives underpin the supply-side argument and specifically the phenomena detailed in the iconic Laffer Curve. As Art Laffer himself put it, “The economic effect [of changes in tax rates] recognizes the positive impact that lower tax rates have on work, output, and employment – and thereby the tax base – by providing incentives to increase these activities. Raising tax rates has the opposite economic effect by penalizing participation in the taxed activities.” Certainly, the economic experience of the last quarter century – and especially the overwhelmingly and undeniably positive effect of the cuts in capital gains and other investment-related taxes – attest to the truth of the ideas of Laffer and the other supply-siders.

The fact of the matter is that there is an entire school of thought within the social science community, known variously as rational choice or public choice, which is based on the same premise as the works of folks like Moynihan and Murray, Wanniski and Laffer, namely the idea that people can and do respond to incentives. As rational actors, individuals order their preferences to maximize utility. And they change their preferences and their behavior as the utility of a specific action is changed by external inducements.

What this means, then, is that Friedman’s complaint that President Bush didn’t “ask the American people to drive 55 miles an hour, [or] buy more fuel-efficient cars,” and couldn’t manage to “fully mobilize the most powerful innovation engine in the world – the U.S. economy – to produce a scalable alternative to oil,” is completely absurd. He apparently is incapable of understanding what it would take to achieve any of those objectives.

No one, not even the President, can “ask” people to do things that are, by definition, “irrational” and expect any measure of compliance. People drive 55 or trade in their Land Cruisers for smart cars for one reason: because the incentives to do so cause them to alter

their preferences. Or to put it another way, people change their behavior when there is an incentive – a real, tangible, and often financial incentive – for them to make such a change. They change not because someone in authority asks them to do so, but because it costs too much not to do so.

The same goes for “mobilizing the economy.” Now, the economy could, at least in theory, be set in motion to produce practical alternative energy sources as Friedman hopes. But we doubt seriously whether he or anyone else on the left would approve of what it would take to do so. Indeed, we can just about guarantee that members of Congress would be entirely unable to do the one thing that they would absolutely need to do, namely to shut their yaps. Do you suppose it ever occurs to anyone in Congress that berating current energy producers and threatening to slap them with a windfall profits tax might serve as a *dis*incentive to others who might otherwise be inclined to invest time, effort, and capital into the development of energy resources?

Congress and the President would also have to figure out a way to provide sizeable economic incentives to potential energy producers, most likely in the form of hefty corporate and perhaps personal tax cuts in return for investment and/or production.

Short of that, the development of such energy resources will simply have to wait for the market to provide such economic incentives, as it appears finally to be doing. The expectation that the necessary investments would somehow magically appear without either government-sponsored or market-driven incentives is absurd. Yet that is what Friedman expects from George W. Bush.

And that brings us to the second, related problem that we see with the conventional wisdom embodied in Friedman’s ill-considered rant, namely his expectations of and beliefs about the presidency. Apparently, Friedman believes that the president is no mere mortal, but some sort of supernatural being, able to wave a wand and make all sorts of wonderful, magical things happen. Despite the fact that “the

most powerful innovation engine in the world” is both massive and massively complicated, Bush should be able to “fully mobilize” it, just like that. Despite the fact that Iraq is a highly dysfunctional, contrived state, a multi-ethnic, sectarian nightmare trashed by decades of corrupt Baathist tyranny, President Bush, nonetheless should be able to “make it work.”

This is symptomatic of what the Cato Institute’s Gene Healy calls “the cult of the presidency,” the belief that the president is, or at least should be, a virtually omnipotent super-human for whom no task is too daunting. Healy writes:

The chief executive of the United States is no longer a mere constitutional officer charged with faithful execution of the laws. He is a soul nourisher, a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns, and spiritual malaise. He – or she – is the one who answers the phone at 3 a.m. to keep our children safe from harm. The modern president is America’s shrink, a social worker, our very own national talk show host. He’s also the Supreme Warlord of the Earth....

Americans, left, right, and other, think of the “commander in chief” as a superhero, responsible for swooping to the rescue when danger strikes.

As the incomparable George Will notes, this “Caesaropapism,” the belief that the president should be a “Caesar-cum-Pope” able to meet all the temporal and spiritual needs of his “flock,” is the reason for the type of disillusionment expressed by Friedman and by the 80+% of Americans who tell pollsters that they think the country is on the “wrong track.” Despite what Friedman and most other Americans appear to believe about their presidents, they are still mere mortals and are thus bound to disappoint and to fail at the impossible tasks expected of them. Citing Healy, Will writes:

An occupational hazard of the inflated presidency is a hazard to the nation. It is what Healy (borrowing a term from psychiatry) calls Acquired Situational Narcissism. As repositories of absurd expectations, and surrounded by sycophants, presidents become deranged. Inevitably, the inflation of expectations causes what Healy calls an “arc of disillusionment” that diminishes one president after another.

Given this, the “failures” of the Bush administration would all but certainly also be the failures of the Gore administration, or the Rodham Clinton administration, or the Obama administration, or even the McCain administration. The expectations that Americans have for their presidents are not merely unreasonable, but impossible. Presidents cannot, as Obama has promised, “perfect” the nation. They cannot, as Bush promised, “rid the world” of tyranny. They cannot nourish our souls or fix the holes in our hearts. They cannot nourish our hearts and fix the holes in our souls.

They also cannot save the residents of a decrepit, corrupt city from the ravages of nature. They cannot keep all people everywhere safe at all times, no matter how expansive their wiretapping authority. And they most definitely cannot “mobilize the most powerful innovation engine in the world.”

The risk from such nonsensically inflated expectations is not merely, as Will suggests, that Americans are serially disappointed by their leaders and thus prone to bouts of cynicism. The real risk is that presidents themselves will tend to buy into the same delusion, to believe their own ridiculous rhetoric, and thus to pursue their own ridiculous promises, often with disastrous results.

As we note in the above piece, the belief in their own supremacy can lead presidents to do some awfully foolish things, to pursue foreign policies that are not

merely dangerous but unachievable as well. It can also lead them try their hand at foolish and unfeasible domestic policies, with the same guarantee of failure.

It is hard to believe, but it is entirely possible that during the next administration – regardless of who is president – we as a nation will look back fondly at George W. Bush and his administration, appreciating too late his political weakness and inability even to attempt to “fix” the problems of the nation.

Given the candidates left, it is all but certain that Bush’s successor will be someone who agrees with the type of conventional wisdom articulated so well last week by Tom Friedman. What that means then is that he (or she) will both misunderstand the conditions under which constructive human activity is often undertaken and suffer from delusions about his (or her) ability to control that activity. This is a potentially deadly mix.

As Healy notes, the last major presidential candidate to reject the role of all-powerful superhero was Phil Gramm, who in the 1996 presidential primaries rejected advice to pander to the religious right, snarling “I ain’t running for preacher.” Gramm, you may recall, finished fifth in the Iowa caucuses and dropped out of the race shortly thereafter.

It is unlikely that any candidate will soon repeat Gramm’s mistake, which means that it is unlikely that anyone who has any sense of proportion or modesty will soon be elected president. And this, in turn, means that the next president will try to meet Tom Friedman’s exaggerated expectations, despite their impossibility. Friedman, for his part, worries that the United States is becoming less competitive because President Bush has not heeded his advice. We, by contrast, wonder what misfortunes the next president will heap upon the country by reversing course and listening to ill-informed and impractical counsel of the country’s army of Friedmans, all begging the president relentlessly to “do more.”

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.