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THEY SAID IT

"It is well that war is so terrible -- otherwise we would grow too fond of it."

General Robert E. Lee, *Statement at the Battle of Fredericksburg*,
December 13, 1862.

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THE "WAR" FOR THE WHITE HOUSE.

So it's convention time again, and the entire political world is focused on and excited about Denver. There, over the next few days, "the one" will be formally nominated, the Democratic ticket will be officially introduced, and the angst and dissension of the last few months will be set aside as the party unites in common purpose to end the horrors of the last eight years and return one of their own to the White House. The anticipation and tension are palpable.

Or so we've heard. For our part, we're having a tough time caring. Conventions in general have become such carefully coordinated, micro-managed stage productions that it's difficult to imagine anything less interesting, much less exciting. The only way this week-long campaign commercial will be even remotely interesting is if the intransigent Hillary supporters and the even more intransigent hippy-phile, loony leftist protesters manage to find their own common cause and collaborate to turn the 2008 Denver convention into a replay of 1968 Chicago one. We're not holding our breath, though. Do you suppose there's any chance that NBC will ease our pain and replay some of the "highlights" from the Chi-Com games during the week, just to keep us awake?

But maybe we're being unfair. It's not true that the Democratic National Convention will have no effect on us at all. It's just that our overwhelming reaction is not excitement, but relief – relief that our political instincts have been proven correct and that the Democratic explanation for some of the most embarrassing political moments of the last eight years has, by contrast, been proven wrong.

You see, for the entirety of the Bush administration, and even before it, the Democrats have insisted that President Bush's chief political advisor, Karl Rove, is an evil genius who manipulated the political culture behind the scenes in order to dupe the public and embarrass the political opposition.

And for a while there, we became inclined to agree with them. We tried for years to make the case that the Democrats were their own worst enemy; that they had only themselves and their own political stupidity to blame for their failings. But eventually, that line became untenable. It just didn't seem possible that the Democrats could so pitch-perfectly play the fools, over and over and over again. Their willingness, or more accurately, their *need* to play to type, to take positions contrary to the expressed will of the electorate, and for even the most experienced and hardened among them to act like political novices and amateurs just seemed too twisted and unnatural to be the result of mere politics.

Even after the GOP imploded in 2006 and surrendered control of Congress, the Democrats acted as if they were under some sort of spell. They selected as their leaders two shockingly irritating political incompetents, both of whom inexplicably insisted on behaving so childishly and so boorishly that it appeared for all the world as though they were trying to make the disengaged and bungling Bushies look good by comparison. Indeed, at one point this summer, President Bush's approval rating stood at an abysmal 29%, yet that was still an epic 20 points higher than that of the Democrat-controlled Congress.

How else could we explain it? When the Democrats and their supporters shrieked about the nefariousness and manipulation of Karl Rove and his dark arts, we were inclined to wonder if they weren't right.

But they weren't. And it is comforting and more than a little gratifying therefore to find confirmation that our instincts were right all along, that our initial explanation, namely that these people are just really bad at what they do, was correct. Karl Rove is long gone. Bush himself is a non-factor, at least politically. And even Vice President Cheney, the Democrats' secondary bogeyman, has all but disappeared from the public stage.

And yet the Democrats keep stumbling along, seemingly determined to ignore the causes of past failures and thus to repeat them. This week's

proceedings in Denver may not be exciting or even very interesting, but they will be, at least, reassuring, in that they will confirm that the Democrats' collective political instincts remain exactly as they have been over the last three decades, during which they have won only two of seven presidential contests and never once won an absolute majority of votes.

The evidence of this ongoing political obtuseness finally became undeniable last week. When the presumptive Republican nominee was unable to answer a reporters' question about how many homes he and his wife Cindy own, the Democrats jumped. Unfortunately for them, before jumping, they failed to look to see where they might land.

As numerous political commentators have noted, the Obama campaign's willingness to bring up a candidate's homes and the luxury therein was, at the very least, shortsighted. After all, Obama's house is what ties him personally to disgraced and imprisoned former fundraiser Tony Rezko, and the discussion of McCain's gaffe quite naturally created an opportunity for the Republicans to reintroduce Rezko and his relationship to Obama into the campaign.

More to the point, though, the excessive glee and awkwardness that characterized the Obama team's immediate reaction to McCain's blunder provided a clue as to how they think about politics, what they believe will win the election, and how they see the electorate. By their reaction, they once again made obvious the campaign team's inexperience and obstinacy.

Had the Obamanites agreed to use the McCain-house gaffe strictly to demonstrate that the 71-year-old Senator is forgetful and out of touch, they would have scored a compelling, though minor point. But that's not what they did. They decided to push the case a little further, hoping to make a major, campaign-altering score, but in the process sacrificed the persuasiveness of their thrust.

According to them, you see, McCain has multiple homes, so many he can't count them all. Therefore, he cannot possibly understand the concerns of average

Americans. He's rich after all. And, as any schoolboy knows, the rich only understand the rich, or at least that's true if the "rich" in question happen to be Republicans. The Obama campaign took a perfectly relevant and potentially incisive point about McCain's age and alertness and tried to turn it into a case for class warfare. Moreover, they gave the impression that they were willing not simply to make this a new front in the battle against McCain, but to make it the only front, to dive headlong into the rhetoric and strategy of class warfare.

Had they asked us, we might have suggested before doing so that they talk to John Edwards and ask him how his primary campaign panned out. Or Dick Gephardt, to see how well he did in his pursuit of the nomination in '04. Or maybe they could have asked Al Gore and his campaign guru Bob Shrum how well the class warfare angle worked for them in 2000.

Now, we don't pretend to be any sort of experts in the field of determining what Americans want. Indeed, we have written repeatedly that we are sometimes completely baffled by what motivates voters. That said, one thing that we happen to understand clearly is that the American electorate is generally unreceptive to class warfare pandering. The Democratic class warriors are everywhere and always staking their political hopes on the idea that they can stir up the emotions of America's lower and middle classes and can exploit their hatred of the rich.

But Americans don't hate the rich. They want to be the rich. Or, if it's too late for them to be rich, then they want their kids, or their kid's kids to be rich. And they know instinctively that anyone in this great country can be, if not "rich," then at least richer than they are today.

That's the point that the left never seems to get about the good old U.S. of A, that poverty is only rarely persistent and where it is, the causes are largely those that are exacerbated rather than alleviated by government interference. The fact of the matter is that the overwhelming majority of Americans will move up and down through the income-distribution

quintiles, with even the majority of the truly poor making their way out of the underclass and into the middle class and beyond.

Census data and other longitudinal studies have shown time and time again that poverty in this country is almost always temporary and that income mobility remains one of the nation's most enduring and exceptional features. Consider, for example, the following, taken from a *Wall Street Journal* editorial and based on the results of a 10-year Treasury Department study, the results of which were released last November:

The U.S. remains a dynamic society marked by rapid and mostly upward income mobility. Much as they always have, Americans on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder continue to climb into the middle and sometimes upper classes in remarkably short periods of time.

The Treasury study examined a huge sample of 96,700 income tax returns from 1996 and 2005 for Americans over the age of 25. The study tracks what happened to these tax filers over this 10-year period. One of the notable, and reassuring, findings is that nearly 58% of filers who were in the poorest income group in 1996 had moved into a higher income category by 2005. Nearly 25% jumped into the middle or upper-middle income groups, and 5.3% made it all the way to the highest quintile.

Of those in the second lowest income quintile, nearly 50% moved into the middle quintile or higher, and only 17% moved down. This is a stunning show of upward mobility, meaning that more than half of all lower-income Americans in 1996 had moved up the income scale in only 10 years.

Those who start at the bottom but hold full-time jobs nonetheless enjoyed steady income gains. The Treasury study found that those tax filers who were in the poorest income quintile in 1996 saw a near doubling of their incomes (90.5%) over the subsequent decade. Those in the highest quintile, on the other hand, saw only modest income gains (10%). The nearby table tells the story, which is that the poorer an individual or household was in 1996 the greater the percentage income gain after 10 years.

Only one income group experienced an absolute decline in real income--the richest 1% in 1996. Those households lost 25.8% of their income. Moreover, more than half (57.4%) of the richest 1% in 1996 had dropped to a lower income group by 2005. Some of these people might have been "rich" merely for one year, or perhaps for several, as they hit their peak earning years or had some capital gains windfall. Others may simply have not been able to keep up with new entrepreneurs and wealth creators.

The key point is that the study shows that income mobility in the U.S. works down as well as up--another sign that opportunity and merit continue to drive American success, not accidents of birth. The "rich" are not the same people over time.

Now, we wouldn't go so far as to say that the American people understand all of this academically, but they understand it instinctively and know that if they work hard, they will someday become more prosperous. That is the "American Dream" writ large. And while most people are more than willing to take on greater responsibility as they earn greater wealth, they are not so eager to see the "rich," whom they hope to emulate, punished and disparaged.

But that apparently is not going to stop the Democrats from doing so.

A second sign that Barack Obama and the rest of his party haven't quite come to grips with the political realities demonstrated over the past quarter century came in the form of the selection of Delaware Senator Joe Biden as a running mate. Now, generally speaking, we think it's true what pollsters say, that vice presidential candidates only rarely affect the outcome of an election. And we suspect that this will be the case with Biden. Biden, in our opinion, is a little like NASCAR: there is roughly a 75% chance that he'll be just fine as he goes around in circles over and over again; but there's a 25% chance that he'll give the fans what they came to see and crash and burn spectacularly. In either case, what Biden's selection suggests is that Obama and his team have decided to make the "fight" for votes of "average Americans" the centerpiece of their general election campaign.

Biden is, we are told, a fighter, a scrapper, a hard-nosed kid from Scranton, PA who had to work his way up from nothing, beating the system all along the way. He's a guy willing to go toe-to-toe with anyone, to fight for what is right, etc. etc., ad infinitum. Whether or not that description of Biden is true (and we have our doubts), the nature of the discussion and the language that accompanied the roll-out of the ticket serve to add a class warrior motif to the campaign's repertoire, complementing or even supplanting the soft, almost angelic persona Obama has sought to exude thus far. These guys are tough. And the Republicans had better not forget it.

That's all well and good, we guess. But it's also unlikely to resonate with voters. As the *Washington Post's* David Ignatius pointed out over the weekend, this "fighter" theme has become a staple of Democratic political strategy of late. The title of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's recent book is *Know Your Power*. The title of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's is *The Good Fight*. These guys (and gals) want voters to think they're fighters, brawlers, as Ignatius called them. And how's that working out? As we noted

above, Congress is the least respected institution in the nation according to polls, so low that the much disparaged President Bush can hardly see them from the comparatively lofty heights of his approval ratings. Americans want a great many things these days, but “Washington brawlers” does not seem to be one of them.

This is also a lesson that was learned by the Republicans in the aftermath of their takeover of Congress in the 1990s. Then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich liked to walk around proclaiming that he was at the head of a revolution in American government. And indeed, the GOP takeover became quickly known as the “Gingrich Revolution.” But the American people were in no mood for rebels.

Newt scored big in 1994 and then proceeded to lose almost every battle after that. The electorate didn’t want a revolution. It didn’t want fighters and brawlers. It wanted government essentially to mind its own business and not to screw things up. Bill Clinton eventually figured this out and declared an end to hostilities and to the “era of big government.” Newt and the GOP figured it out too, but not before a great amount of damage had been inflicted on the new majority and on Gingrich himself, who was deposed by his underlings after only four years at the head of his own revolution.

Neither Barack Obama nor any of his advisors seem to have learned any of these lessons, though. They think they have the upper hand, given their guy’s unique political talents, and they are convinced that the problem with previous class-warfare-driven campaign “fights” wasn’t the nature of the campaigns, but the nature of the candidate. Neither Al Gore nor John Kerry, to name just two, was “chosen” in the way that Obama is. Neither they nor anyone else before them was “a leader that God has blessed us with” as Speaker Pelosi recently described Obama. They were mere men. He is “the one.”

It should not go unmentioned here that a contributing factor in this unfolding potential Democratic debacle is the role that the media is playing. Four years ago, we

noted repeatedly that John Kerry was being lulled into a false sense of security by the mainstream press, who exaggerated both his own strengths and his opponent’s weaknesses. Borrowing the term from liberal blogger Mickey Kaus, we argued that Kerry was “cocooning,” that is surrounding himself with the warm and comforting praise and affection of the media and thereby reinforcing his own self-image and distancing himself from reality.

Suggesting that Obama runs the risk of doing precisely the same thing is an understatement if ever there was one. Obama’s media coverage has been so fawning that even Ed Rendell, the governor of Pennsylvania and a former chairman of the Democratic National Committee recently called the press coverage of Obama “embarrassing.” Yet he seems to be buying it.

As we noted above, the Obama camp’s consistent campaign meme since clinching the nomination has been that the Republicans are masters of manipulation, skilled at sliming their opponents, but dreadfully incapable of governing. And that this campaign will be different, since now the Republicans are stumbling, and the Obama camp can use McCain’s missteps to destroy him. Consider, if you will, the similarity between that campaign strategy and the following, drawn from a column penned last week by Dick Polman:

Given the fact that John McCain has stepped into a steaming pile of manure - by confessing that he is clueless about the extent of his own lavish lifestyle - the only question now is whether the heretofore timid Obama campaign has the requisite moxie to exploit this priceless gift . . . not just today, but for the next 73 days.

Let’s put it this way: If this situation was (sic) reversed, if a Democratic candidate had so egregiously whiffed on a question of how many houses he has, the GOP would pound away with repetitive

precision until the damning message about the “out-of-touch rich elitist” was emblazoned in every American mind.

The fury of the McCain camp’s counterattack yesterday (Obama has a house that a sleazy guy helped him buy! How dare anyone attack a former POW!) was vivid proof that Republicans recognize their dilemma. They may not be able to govern worth a darn, as the last eight years have demonstrated, but they are masters of the visceral campaign message. And they well understand that McCain made the mistake of handing the Democrats a visceral campaign message. It ain’t brain surgery: “McCain doesn’t even know how many houses he has.”

McCain uttered a truth about himself, a truth that the GOP would have preferred he not reveal. He provided an honest window into his character, an aspect of his psyche laid bare. He let slip that he lives a life that in no way resembles the lives led by the millions of average Joes whom he aspires to represent - a life so bountiful that he doesn’t even know its full bounty.

We can’t say for sure who is cribbing from whom here. But clearly there’s some sharing of answers going on. And as much as it may make the Obama

team feel better about things to have the press confirm their brilliance, believing the likes of Polman just because they agree with him is a mistake of potentially mammoth proportion. If Obama’s people are unable to understand why their candidate isn’t performing better, it’s simply because they’re trapped in the cocoon, sealed away from contrary opinion and inconvenient facts.

We can’t say for sure, of course, but we suspect that this will be the theme of the week. Obama will give a dazzling speech, capping off a week of Bush-bashing and promises to fight. The media will eat it up. And the Democrats will leave Denver euphoric, confident that they have accomplished their mission and successfully begun the last leg of the race back to the White House.

And then they will go home for the weekend and have to begin thinking up explanations for why they got virtually no bounce from the week-long media-soaked festivities. They’ll tell us that things have changed and that no one gets a big bounce anymore. And to a certain extent they’ll be right. But what they will never admit, indeed, what they will never even know is that the bigger reason for the torpidity of their poll numbers is that they’re playing exclusively to the crowd that’s already committed and repeating the mistakes of their predecessors, mistakenly believing either that the country has changed or that the sheer gloriousness of their candidate will make such change inevitable.

We doubt it.

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