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## THEY SAID IT

Society is always prone to accept a person offhand for what he pretends to be, so that a crackpot posing as a genius always has a certain chance to be believed. In modern society, with its characteristic lack of discerning judgment, this tendency is strengthened, so that someone who not only holds opinions, but also presents them in a tone of unshakable conviction will not so easily forfeit his prestige, no matter how many times he has been demonstrably wrong.

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951.

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## LET THE SPINNING WHEEL SPIN.

In case you hadn't noticed, there are a great many similarities between the art of forecasting the direction and force of hurricanes and forecasting the outcome and closeness of elections. This became readily apparent to us during the past couple of weeks as we flipped back and forth between the hurricane reports on the Weather Channel and Fox News's coverage of the conventions.

The weather guy explains where the storm is currently located, tells us where it appears to be headed based on a variety of inputs ranging from factual data to expert opinions, and then adds the caveat that any and all predictions based on what he or she has just said could, and likely will be rendered obsolete by any one or a combination of unpredictable factors. The election guy follows a similar pattern, citing current polls, focus groups, and expert opinions to explain where the race "stands today" and where it is likely headed based on this "snapshot," and then adds the warning that everything he or she has just stated is not simply likely to change, but will change – so "stay tuned."

Hurricane forecasting, although far from perfect, has become increasingly accurate over the past fifty years or so due to significant advances in technology. This has made the nation a safer place by allowing officials to fine-tune and time their preparations for the approaching storm.

Election forecasting, on the other hand, has been made more difficult by technological innovations. Yes, we know, technology has improved the data gathering and analysis part of the process. But highly sophisticated advances in what F.A. Hayek once described as the "art of the modern ministries of propaganda" have made it virtually impossible for anyone to anticipate with any degree of accuracy what strange notions might come to be regarded as truth by a large minority or even a majority of Americans and adopted by them as a basis for

casting their vote. Needless to say, this has made the nation a far more dangerous place by greatly increasing the possibility that a genuinely incompetent, jackleg politician will someday occupy the White House and make a catastrophic mistake of some sort.

We can't know whether this will ever actually happen, of course. But there is no question that what has come to be known as "spin" in Washington is so much a part of the political game today that no one any longer even pretends that it isn't. Party platforms and positions and the factual qualifications of the candidates are, of course, still considered during the election process. But the most important practitioners of election politics today are the modern day sophists who, as Plato described their antecedents, are disdainful of truth, and use rhetorical sleight-of-hand and ambiguous language to support fallacious reasoning.

Can Barack overcome his lack of practical hands-on, governing experience by convincing voters that he has Messiah-like qualities? Is he helped or hurt by his trademark tactic of gazing off into space over the heads of his audience with a look that appears to denote either communication with a divine being or severe gas pain? Can Hillary persuade the woman of the nation that Sarah Palin is not the woman that women want as the first woman Vice President? Can Sarah's Palin's pregnant unmarried daughter be used to the advantage of the opposition? How can Barack get the working class male vote and still remain attractive to liberal woman who like their males to be soft and non-threatening?

This is the game today. It is big and important and obviously much more interesting to the celebrity conscious American public than discussions of tax and trade policy. And it's a game everyone gets to play, from the giant media conglomerates with access to millions of readers and viewers to the individual bloggers sitting in basement offices in their pajamas typing away, hoping to be read and revered by other gadflies in other basements in other towns and cities all over the world.

The demands of the 24-hour news cycle feed this frenzy. Facts, opinion, rumors, and outright lies become indistinguishable from each other in this hurricane of information, fabrications, and speculation. Even "the man on the street" can get a few minutes of fame on a national stage if he can provide a sound bite that gives an air of authenticity to a message that some reporter wants heard but is prevented by his or her claim to objectivity from stating personally.

This game is action packed. Fluid. Unpredictable. And fun. In fact, it has become the new national pastime, more interesting and exciting than professional sports and American Idol combined. Like NASCAR, large elements of skill and luck are involved and there is the ever-present likelihood that one of the competitors will crash and burn.

Moreover, this game never ends and there are no time-outs. The gates to the stadium never close. Action continues 24-7, day in day out, year in year out. And there is always someone interesting on the stage. Participants include Hollywood celebrities, evil geniuses, wizards, color commentators, intellectuals, comedians, anger mongers, race mongers, eccentrics, and bloated, degenerate, Falstaffian drunks, reprobates, and crooks who provide a constant patter of comic relief by playing the role of respected party patriarchs to the delight of a crowd that knows better but doesn't care.

Most importantly, this game contains an element of danger that is almost beyond belief. No video game can compete. In this real life drama, the leadership of the most powerful nation on earth is being fought on a same battle ground as that used by competing soap companies, using the same weapons, the same tactics, the same generals, and seeking the same prize, namely the loyalty and admiration of "the masses."

This rough beast, "the masses," has been gaining political power in the Western world for almost 200 years now, ever since it emerged as an identifiable, social force in the aftermath of the French revolution. The existence and the importance of this group was

first recognized early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a disciple and collaborator of Saint-Simon named Leon Halevy, who observed, according to Hayek in his classic 1952 book, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, that the time was approaching when “the art of moving the masses” will be so perfectly developed that those who have mastered it will “possess the power to please and to move with the same certainty as the mathematician solves a geometrical problem or the chemist analyzes some substance.”

Gustave Le Bon was the first to publish an in depth analysis of the implications of the emergence of the masses as a political force. He did so in his classic book, *The Crowd*, which, it is worth noting, was published in 1895, the year in which Alfred Dreyfus was falsely convicted of treason, which led directly to the creation by Charles Maurras of the revolutionary political gambit that has since become known to history as “the big lie,” and which Hitler later described in *Mein Kampf* as the simple process of interjecting into the discussion a lie that is so “colossal” that no one would believe that anyone “could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.”

As every schoolboy used to know, Hitler’s propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels raised the concept of “the big lie” to an art form. But by virtually any measure, he was a neophyte when compared to the professional political propagandists who today handle the campaigns of the candidates for president of the most powerful nation in the world. This is, of course, not because these men and woman are necessarily any more skillful than Goebbels was, but because of the vast, global communication networks that modern technology has made available to them.

It is important to understand that Le Bon’s concern about the “progressive power of the growth of the masses” wasn’t based on the notion that the “crowd,” as he called it, was made up of stupid, impulsive, or irrational individuals. It was founded on his belief that smart, prudent, and rational individuals tend to abandon reason when they join together to acquire political power. As such, he said, they

become easily persuaded by those who are skilled in “the art of moving the masses” to “undertake the accomplishment of certain acts with irresistible impetuosity.”

Le Bon’s fears proved to be remarkably prescient in the upcoming, highly bloody 20<sup>th</sup> century. And, needless to say, these fears should not go unheeded during these opening days of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, Hannah Arendt’s fascinating 1951 book on the source of the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, should be required reading for anyone who is seeking an insight into the consequences of the growth within American society today of great, atomized masses of people, from all races and all walks of life, rich and poor alike, who no longer feel bound to the American experience by love and respect for its traditional moral code and Judeo-Christian religious beliefs.

These individuals are the primary targets of today’s political propagandists because of their intense longing for a purpose that might provide their lives with the kind of meaning that faith and family and a feeling community provided to their fathers and mothers.

Arendt notes that these are the folks whom, history records, are most likely to seek refuge from their personal problems and personal failings by joining a political cause, often one with totalitarian roots. She points out that this is the social strata from which Heinrich Himmler sought recruits for his notorious SS because he knew these people could easily be convinced to exchange their concerns about their “everyday problems” and their personal well being for a commitment to an ideology with claims to a greater and more universal importance.

There is no “cure” for the dangers of modern day, political sophism. No new law or regulation can defend truth against falsehood. Indeed, any attempt to try such a thing would undoubtedly make matters worse by opening the gate to further manipulation of the media. One can only hope and pray that Milton was correct in 1644 when he wrote the remarkable

*Areopagitica*, which was delivered in support of freedom of the press before the famous Long Parliament, during the early days of the English civil war. It went as follows:

And though all the winds of doctrine  
were let loose to play upon the earth, so  
Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by  
licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her  
strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple;  
who ever knew Truth put to the worse in  
a free and open encounter.

Time will tell.

## **SARAH PALIN IS AMERICA.**

Generally speaking, when mainstream political commentators discuss the so-called “culture wars” they take one of two tacks. Either they dismiss the very concept as a contrived, cynical creation of political operatives, designed to motivate their respective bases and counter voter apathy; or they instinctively lay blame for starting the wars at the feet of fanatical “conservatives” who are too stupid to adjust to modernity and too obnoxious to accept “progress” peacefully. Both views are, in our opinion, wrong; and not just wrong, but wildly and misleadingly wrong, so wrong as to render most discussions of cultural, ethical, and moral issues in American politics useless, if not worse.

The first of these depictions of the culture wars is probably the more interesting of the two because it is contrary to conventional wisdom and because it is supported by actual data and academic research. But it is also the most easily dismissed. The most vocal and the best-known proponent of this view is Morris Fiorina, a professor at Stanford and one of the true giants of American political science. Four years ago, in the midst of the vituperative campaign between George W. Bush and John Kerry, Fiorina’s book on the subject, *Culture War, The Myth of Polarized America*, was published to much critical acclaim. In a *Wall Street Journal* piece, Fiorina simplified and summarized the arguments in his book thusly:

Observers of contemporary American politics apparently have reached a new consensus around the proposition that old disagreements about economics now pale in comparison to new divisions based on sexuality, morality, and religion, divisions so deep and bitter as to justify talk of war in describing them.

Yet research indicates otherwise: Publicly available databases show that the culture war script embraced by journalists and politicians lies somewhere between simple exaggeration and sheer nonsense. There is no culture war in the U.S. – no battle for the soul of America rages, at least none that most Americans are aware of.

Certainly, one can find a few warriors who engage in noisy skirmishes. Many of the activists in the political parties and the various cause groups do hate each other and regard themselves as combatants in a war. But their hatreds and battles are not shared by the great mass of Americans – certainly nowhere near to “80-90 percent of the country” – who are for the most part moderate in their views and tolerant in their manner.

This is all well and good, and certainly there is an argument to be made that the impact of cultural issues has been exaggerated. But the point can be taken too far and, in any case, it ignores the crucial context and history of the cultural battles. Yes, Fiorina is probably correct when he says that most people do not feel that they’re involved in a pitched culture war; that most people have more nuanced beliefs than the political elites or than the fringe radicals; and that most people have mixed views on issues and are conservative on some and more liberal on others. But so what?

There are two political parties in this nation. With one or two exceptions, every individual who is responsible for the creation of public policy, particularly at the federal level, is a member of one or the other.

And whether Fiorina likes it or not, these parties differentiate themselves almost exclusively on cultural issues, a direct effect of the fact that almost all of the day-to-day operations of government fall outside their direct circle of responsibility, being handled instead by myriad government bureaucracies, which are in turn guided and directed by tens of thousand of laws and regulations that have accumulated over the years. Voters have a choice between the two parties, and they inevitably choose the one that comes closest to representing their views on the issues that, as we noted above, each party relies upon to differentiate itself from the other. This, in turn, means that voters are *de facto* cultural warriors, whether they would like to be or not, or again, whether Fiorina likes it or not.

We suppose it is possible that one or the other party could make some headway with conflicted or unaffiliated voters if it abandoned some of the cultural agenda. But since there is no guarantee of this, it's hardly likely to happen. The parties are in this to win elections, not to test academic theories. No party is going to abandon its base of *guaranteed* votes in pursuit of *hypothetical* votes in the center.

More to the point, the presumption that all cultural issues are equally important, or that all voters assign them the same weight, is distorting, to say the least. National Public Radio's Dick Meyer, a supporter of Fiorina's thesis, argued recently that the culture war meme makes little sense because "Unlike other times in U.S. history, there simply are no issues such as slavery, Prohibition or Vietnam that inspire violent protest or social disruption." That's, well, dumb. There may not be a single cultural issue that affects all voters, but there are myriad cultural issues that spark acute and intense emotional interest among certain groups of voters. Indeed, it would be a rare subset of voters that doesn't identify strongly with at least one culture-related issue.

Take, for example, American Catholics or, more specifically, their bishops. American bishops have, historically, been strong advocates for "social justice" and economic "fairness" – tropes most often considered "progressive" and associated with the

political left. But today, concern for those issues among bishops burns a little less intensely, abortion having become the predominant concern for most bishops and, in turn, for most Catholic voters. These voters are, in many ways, the very personification of the phrase "single-issue voters." And just because the intensity of their distress over this issue is not shared by enough of their fellow Americans to cause "violent protest or social disruption," does not mean that the issue is irrelevant or that these voters are not "real" culture warriors.

The bottom line here is that while polls are helpful tools for assessing beliefs, attitudes, and expectations, actual voting behavior itself has only one real measure, votes. And to pretend that the votes are divided between the parties simply through a process of "sorting" (i.e. random division into roughly equal halves), as Meyer and Fiorina apparently believe, suggests a disdain for American voters that is not justified by the data.

As for the second depiction of the culture war, namely that it is a product of right-wing fanatics, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, claiming that conservatives started the culture wars is a bit like claiming that the Brits started World War II. Yes indeed, the Brits were the first ones to actually declare war. But it was only after the Germans invaded Poland.

The fact of the matter is that conservative participation in the culture war is a truly "conservative" undertaking. They are not now nor have they ever been the aggressors in this war. They are reactionaries, reacting to the assault on traditional American culture that began in the 1960s and has continued ever since, in fits and spurts at times, but always challenging traditionalism and its tenets.

Consider the issues that generally constitute the "culture war" milieu: abortion, family, sexuality and sexual preference, and education. On each of these fronts, the left attacked traditionalism and the traditional standard, in many cases with the explicit aide of unelected and unaccountable judicial

accomplices. The political right, under assault on the cultural front and unable to do anything about it, given the participation of the judicial demagogues, pushed back, and for its trouble has earned for its adherents the title of “culture warriors.”

The left and its allies in the media are fond of narratives that accentuate their own moral righteousness. And so they have, for forty years exactly, insisted that Republican presidential dominance, in the nation as a whole and in the South in particular, is the result of racism, racial cues, and the so-called Southern Strategy. But a more balanced and historically supported view of Republican dominance takes into account the fact that since 1968, religion, traditionalism, and the values of “average” Americans has been under assault from the left, a fact which affects the country at large, but the traditionalist South more intensely.

We won't dwell too long on the philosophical origins of the left's assault on traditional social structures and traditional morality, but it should suffice to say that every leftist intellectual hero, from Rousseau to Marx, from Mill to Nietzsche, thought that traditional institutions, i.e. religion, family, community, were hindrances to the “actualization” of mankind's destiny, be it spiritual, moral, or economic. And all therefore attacked those structures. And so did their protégés and other assorted wannabes. For many, the assault on traditional institutions may have just been happenstance, the side effect of “progress” and liberty. But for a great many more, such assaults served a philosophical and social purpose.

And this, at long last, brings us to Sarah Palin.

In the nine days since Alaska Governor Sarah Palin was announced as John McCain's running mate, her candidacy has taken on the shape of the broader culture wars. Immediately after her introduction, the left and its compliant allies in the media began their assault on her, on her religion, on her family, on her history, and on her “values.” Shortly thereafter, Palin herself was blamed for “reigniting the culture wars.” And if you think we're exaggerating this last point,

a September 2 article on Politico.com, a mainstream media political news source was, ironically enough, headlined “Palin Reignites Culture Wars.” How's that for convenient?

As with the broader culture war, the ostensible aim of this all-out assault on Palin is to express differences in opinion with her and to repudiate the policies that she supports. And again, the *real*, unspoken aim of the assault is to destroy her – as a politician, as a woman, and as a symbol.

The problem with Sarah Plain isn't that she's pro-life or that she's pro-abstinence sex ed. or that she believes that evolution was directed by an omnipotent and dynamic God. The problem is that she is very much like us. And when we use that word, “us” we mean it in two ways.

First, she is like “us,” the proprietors of The Political Forum. She went to the University of Idaho. We went to the universities of South Dakota, Kansas, and Nebraska. Neither we nor she are Ivy Leaguers. Despite our years in and around politics, we're anything but insiders. Thus, we see what the Ivy League insiders do not. Or at least we try to.

Second, she is like “us” in that she is like most Americans. She has a family to raise. She has a job to do. Her husband has a business to run. Her kids play sports, go to school, join the Army, screw up, come to their parents for help. She's not from a powerful family. And she had to pay her own way to go to school. She's a mother. A wife. And a fighter. In short, she has an appeal that transcends politics, policy, and parties in a way that few other national politicians in recent memory have. She goes to church on Sundays, with her kids and without the cameras rolling. She's a real American woman.

And for that she must be destroyed.

As the author and publisher Roger Kimball reminded us over the weekend, the late, great William F. Buckley once declared that he would rather be governed by the first 1,000 names in the Boston phone book than

by the 1,000 members of the faculty at Harvard. The presumption that academic titling and the pretense to intellectual elitism somehow bestow intelligence or capability in governance is not merely absurd, but more likely backward. And the presumption that because Sarah Palin went to the University of Idaho and was a local TV sportscaster, she is thus less qualified or capable than the guy who has never had a real job (Joe Biden, for the record) is equally absurd and backwards.

Sarah Palin didn't edit the *Harvard Law Review*. And she doesn't think a measure of woman's "feminism" is how willing she is to fight to the right to abort "unwanted" babies. She didn't spend her childhood in a French boarding school. And she doesn't think that learning to put a condom on a banana is sufficient "education" to prevent teen pregnancy. She didn't inherit her seat in government from her father or on the coattails of her husband. And she doesn't think that disabled children are somehow less human and thus less deserving of life.

She is a living, breathing personification of the reaction to the left's war on traditional culture. And the idea of her assuming power therefore aggravates the left beyond words and beyond rationality.

Truth be told, when Sarah Palin was announced, we had our doubts. And still today, we, like a handful of prominent conservative commentators, still occasionally wonder if she was the most "responsible" choice. All of that notwithstanding, politically, Palin was a brilliant selection, and not just because she's a woman.

As classics professor Victor Davis Hanson noted last week, every Democratic presidential and vice presidential nominee since 1980 has been either a lawyer (Mondale, Ferraro, Dukakis, Bentsen, Clinton,

Lieberman, Kerry Edwards, Obama, Biden) or a law-school dropout (Al Gore). By contrast, the GOP has nominated everyman, over and over again – an actor (Reagan), two businessmen (Bush and Bush), a football player (Kemp), an old Washington hand and former Fortune 500 CEO (Cheney), a military officer (McCain) and now a businesswomen/sportscaster/hunter/mother.

The knock against the GOP is that it is out of touch with average Americans, but we see little evidence of that. Indeed, if either party seems to have lost touch with anything, it appears that the Democrats have lost track of Lincoln's famous admonition that this is a country governed "of the people, by the people, and for the people." And not just the people who went to Harvard, Yale, or Columbia and have had "respectable" jobs and have "respectable" (i.e. non-pregnant and not suffering from Down Syndrome) children.

It is possible – *née* probable – that most Americans are, as Morris Fiorina has argued, not all that interested in the culture wars or the politics of rancor and destruction. But if that's the case, then the Democrats have a problem. In their desire to subdue a political opponent, they and their media allies have gone overboard, exposing not just their irrationality and viciousness in pursuit of a foe, but their absolute need to destroy that which is different and therefore represents a threat to their cultural agenda. And to most Americans that will look excessive, spiteful, and unnecessary for. That Sarah Palin is not just a politician, but a metaphor as well will be lost on them. And that's fine. The result will be the same.

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