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THEY SAID IT

A crucial turning point in that earlier history [during the decline of the Roman Empire] occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead--often not recognizing fully what they were doing--was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness . . . And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1981.

PATHWAY TO A REBIRTH OF CONSERVATISM.

As we have been saying in these pages for over ten years now, traditional American conservatism has all but disappeared from the American political landscape. The term still lingers, and remains somewhat useful in political discussions, mostly because no widely recognized alternative has come into the language to describe those who have filled the void left by the virtual disappearance of the conservative movement.

The term neo-conservative is often employed, as is, occasionally, a phrase coined by political commentator Fred Barnes, “big government conservative.” But these are linguistically misleading, to say the least, and will eventually, when the smog over the politically battlefield clears somewhat, give way to a more fitting term for those who would prefer a slightly more limited form of the monolithic state than those on the far left favor.

True conservatism has not and will not die out, however, as some political commentators have recently become fond of predicting. This is because conservatism is not an ideology like communism, socialism or, even American liberalism, which are political constructs, designed and implemented for the purpose of establishing a pre-determined type of social and economic community, and which can, therefore, disappear as governmental prototypes in much the same way as did monarchism and feudalism.

Conservatism, of the other hand, is not a form of government, but is descriptive of a particular way of looking at the world. In this sense, the term conservative is akin to such words as optimism, pessimism, skepticism, and stoicism. When all of the world’s communists and socialists and liberals have disappeared into the dustbin of history, there will still be conservatives around, conservatives with a small “c” that is, just as there will be optimists, pessimists, skeptics, and stoics.

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Conservatives share no political agenda among themselves, or even a common “world view.” They have no leader to whom all look for guidance, either intellectual or otherwise. Indeed, many of the most prominent conservatives around at any given time disagree strongly with each other over a variety of substantive issues ranging from the philosophical to the theological to the political. Conservatism honors no manifesto. It did not spring forth fresh from the agitated mind of some zealot like Rousseau or Marx. It makes no grand promises of a world made better by new fangled feats in social engineering.

In fact, there was nothing new-fangled about the principles, values, standards, and convictions of conservatives. Their beliefs are based on lessons learned from history and revealed truths, on ancient wisdom that dates to the beginning of recorded history as contained in the literature of both the West and the East, in Herodotus, Homer, Aeschylus, Virgil, Marcus Aurelius, Cicero, the Old and New Testaments, the Analects of Confucius, the Tao, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Epic of Gilgamesh.

When contemplating this, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that conservatives are often referred to as “reactionaries.” This is usually intended as a pejorative. The Jacobins were the first to use it – *réactionnaires* – to describe their political opponents. The implication of the term, both then and now, is that the principal consequence of conservatism’s attachment to the past is to support and protect the privileges of a corrupt social, religious, and political elite.

This charge may have had some validity when applied to such counter-revolutionary leaders as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald, and later even to Prince Metternich. But we would argue that the one constant in modern day conservatism, since Burke laid its foundations in 1790, has never been a desire to protect the ruling elite from change, but to protect society from the kind of ill-advised, politically-induced change that wisdom, experience, and a knowledge of human nature and history would indicate are likely to do more harm than good.

Nevertheless, whether conservatives appreciate the term or not, its use within the context of the conflict between “the left” and “the right” today is illuminating, because it points up the fact that the clash between “liberals” and “conservatives” is not a typical political contest of the kind that Plato had in mind when he asked his famous question, “Who shall rule?” It is not a match-up between two political parties, each of which wants simply to govern the nation. It is more in the nature of a revolution, or even a conquest, in which one side is ceaselessly attempting to demolish the existing social and political order and the other “reacts” to each new assault, doing what it can to protect that which it holds dear.

For this reason, the stakes are far greater in this competition than those traditionally associated with a peaceful transfer of political power from one party to another. In this contest, the very soul of the nation is on the line, its traditions and customs, mores, and values, its religious heritage, its fundamental belief in the meaning and purpose of life.

It should be noted that conservatives suffer from several disadvantages in this contest. For starters, they are and will always remain on the defense. They are like the “brave little Dutch boy” from the classic fable *The Little Hero of Haarlem*, who prevented the flood of that city by sitting up all night with his finger in the dyke. Yes, they are “reactionaries,” always reacting to the threat, fighting vigilantly and courageously to hold back the destructive tide that continuously crashes against the protective walls of the civilization and culture that they cherish. They have no pat solutions to mankind’s problems. They have no grand plan to impose on the nation or the world.

One practical consequence of this lack of any agreed upon agenda or manifesto of beliefs is that conservatives are not united in their opposition to “the left.” There are Burkean conservatives, religious conservatives, neo-conservatives, paleo-conservatives, Hayekian conservatives, libertarian conservatives, big-business conservatives, gun toting conservatives, and even, as Fred Barnes has noted, big government conservatives.

Each of these groups is a paladin for a variety of causes, including private enterprise, the sanctity of life, fiscal responsibility, religious freedom, civility, less government intrusion into their lives, property rights, freedom of speech, and a strong and aggressively national defense. All view liberalism as the enemy of their particular cause. All claim guidance and inspiration from that which Patrick Henry described as “the lamp of experience.” Each has considerable public support and an impressive array of weapons for use in defending their cause. These include but are not limited to the Constitution as originally written; hundreds of years of Western traditions, both religious and secular, that are embedded in the psyche of a large majority of Americans without them even being aware of it; and, invariably, the intellectual high ground. But none of these conservative groups share the concerns of all of the others. Indeed, some openly work with liberals in opposition to the goals of other conservatives.

Abortion, for example, is of utmost importance to religious conservatives but of little or no interest to big business conservatives, except to the degree that it influences the intensity of the overall war with liberalism. On the other side, as we have seen throughout the administration of the “compassionate conservative,” George W. Bush, a great many religious conservatives favor big government solutions to social issues.

Another serious problem for conservatives is that any robust defense of conservatism requires some degree of critical thinking, a skill that, due to the deterioration in the public educational system over the past several decades, is rapidly disappearing among Americans. Critical thought requires not just intelligence but specific knowledge. Neither a child nor an adult can have anything meaningful to add or to gain from a discussion of any serious topic if he or she has little or no knowledge on which to base his or her conclusions. How, for example, could anyone understand the threat of totalitarianism if he or she knows nothing about history, economics, sociology, or political science? Of what use are Burke’s reflections on the French Revolution to someone whose historical knowledge

begins and ends with a familiarity with contemporary movies, music, the sex life of Hollywood celebrities, professional sports, and the latest video game?

Too many “educated” Americans today remind one of two of T.S. Eliot’s three great questions from “Choruses From ‘The Rock,’”

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

And of the following from George Santayana’s essay “The Irony of Liberalism,” from *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*.

This happy people can read. It supports a press conforming to the tastes of the common man, or rather to such tastes as common men can have in common; for the best in each is not diffused enough to be catered for in some adventitious power, which guides it for its own purposes, commercial or sectarian. Superstitions old and new thrive in this infected atmosphere; they are now all treated with a curious respect, as if nobody could have anything to object to them. It is all a scramble of prejudices and rumours; whatever first catches the ear becomes a nucleus for all further presumptions and sympathies.

Advertising is the modern substitute for argument, its function is to make the worse appear the better article. A confused competition of all propagandas--those insults to human nature--is carried on by the most expert psychological methods, which the art of advertising has discovered; for instance, by always repeating a lie, when it has been exposed, instead of retracting it. The world at large is deafened; but each propaganda makes its little knot of proselytes, and inspires them with a new

readiness to persecute and to suffer in the sacred cause. The only question is, which propaganda can first materially reach the greatest number of persons, and can most efficaciously quench all the others.

One result is that while there are many people around who call themselves conservatives and who fight for conservative values and positions, fewer and fewer of them can provide intellectually sound arguments for what they believe, and unfortunately, this includes a great many of the leading spokespersons for conservatism in the press, in the pundit community, and in the political arena.

On the other hand, vacant minds are the playground for liberalism. Liberalism feeds and thrives on ignorance of history, economics, sociology, philosophy, or any of the ingredients necessary for critical thought. Liberalism's appeal is emotional. For a liberal to be noble, it is enough that he or she has noble thoughts, to *care*. For a liberal, mistakes that cost the lives of millions and result in unimaginable suffering are justified if they are inspired by good intentions. Richard Rorty, who was a professor of comparative literature at Stanford, an icon of the modern intellectual left, and onetime philosopher-in-chief of the Clinton White House before his death in 2007, stated this most aptly when he once averred that the mere "expression of liberal opinions guarantees personal innocence in a cruel world."

The most important thing to understand about this war between the "right" and the "left" is that neither side can ever win it. Liberalism's fatal flaw is that its fundamental premise, that mankind can be made good by social engineering, is a chimera. As Thomas More pointed out centuries ago, utopia means "nowhere."

Conservatives cannot win either. Like liberals, they can win individual battles, but they cannot win the war, for this war is eternal. It has been going on since the dawn of time. And it will go on until the end of time. This does not mean that it is a lost cause. For, once again, as Eliot so eloquently said, "there is no such thing as a Lost Cause, because there is no such thing

as a Gained Cause. We fight for lost causes because we know that our defeat and dismay may be the preface to our successors' victory, though that victory itself will be temporary; we fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that it will triumph."

Over time, the people fighting this war will die and others will take their place. The battlegrounds will change too. But the *casus belli* will remain the same. To quote T.S. Eliot once again,

The world turns and the world changes,
But one thing does not change (...)
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.

Yes, evil. We are not, of course, saying here that individual liberals are evil. But we do contend that the cause they champion is in fact evil. Time and again, history has shown that collectivism leads to but one place and that is totalitarianism, which is evil. Whether American liberals know it or not, and certainly the vast majority of them do not, they are "laying the tracks along which another death train will travel," to borrow a line from Max Eastman, who was an early fan of Lenin and the Russian revolution, saw the light in the late 1930s, and began lecturing and writing about the evils of the system he had once admired.

It is far too early to forecast the outcome of the current fight between the "big government conservatives" and the "big government liberals." But it is not too early to recognize that supporters of both of these camps are racing toward an extended period of severe disillusionment, when it will become apparent to anyone paying attention that the U.S. government is not only too poor to honor all the promises it has made, but would be incapable, as a practical matter, of delivering on these promises even if it had the money.

That this time is approaching should come as no surprise to anyone who watched the failure of the more extreme versions of collectivism collapse in Russia and Eastern Europe and morph into a rather ordinary police state in China.

It is difficult to predict with any degree of confidence how most Americans are going to react to this coming period of disillusionment. Much will depend on which groups are favored and which are slighted when it comes to dividing a federal pie that is too small to meet the promises that the government has made and to live up to the expectations that have been built on these promises.

The one thing that seems certain, however, is that during this period a great many Americans will come to realize the folly of having placed their trust in the promises of the federal establishment to provide them with goods and services far beyond its available resources. And, God willing, some of these people will follow the advice of Alasdair MacIntyre, as outlined in the “They Said It” section above, meaning that they will join with family, friends, and persons of like interests and faith to construct new forms of community within which the moral life can be sustained during the difficult times in which they live. And conservatism will rise from the ashes of a long and disgraceful experiment in collectivism.

NATIONAL GREATNESS?

For most of his second term and especially in the last two years of his presidency, after he beat the impeachment rap, Bill Clinton obsessed openly and unashamedly about his “legacy.” According to various insiders and confidants, part of this obsession involved Bill raging against the fates, who had, he concluded, conspired to prevent him from becoming one of a handful of truly memorable, historic, and heroic presidents.

You see, Bill rightly understood that true greatness would require great achievements on his part, and that the opportunity to produce great achievements generally involves the presence of some sort of crisis, of which his presidency had none, or at least none that was not self-inflicted. The 1990s, and the Clinton presidency in particular, are often referred to (derisively by some) as America’s “holiday from history,” the era between the end of the Cold War and the attacks of 9/11 in which little of truly lasting significance took place and during which the nation

could afford a foreign policy that was, in the words of Michael Mandelbaum, “social work” on a global stage. Bill wanted desperately to achieve greatness, but the fates chose to trust him with little more than cutting capital gains taxes and making sure the White House interns enjoyed themselves.

We don’t suppose that we need to make the case to our limited readership that the entire nation – nay, the entire world – should be grateful that Bill didn’t get a shot at greatness. To say that he is a self-absorbed sociopath is to “dumb down” those terms. The odds that he could have subjugated his own appetites to the needs of the nation in a time of crisis are too slim to calculate. It may be unfair to judge a man against a hypothetical past, but we’d be surprised if even his best friends and closest allies could say with a straight face that they believe Bill could have risen to the challenge, whatever the challenge might have been. As it turns out, he was an adequate placeholder, but it is highly doubtful that he had greatness in him.

Unfortunately, in this regard, Bill is anything but unique. Indeed, he is a typical of his class, and by class, we mean the modern day political class. We probably wouldn’t go so far as to say that the entire American political class can properly be described as “self-absorbed sociopaths.” But we will say that as a whole, they have, like King Belshazzar of Babylon, “been weighed on the scales and found wanting.” Greatness, it seems, is something they don’t have in them.

Of course, the real downside of this is that the next president, the next Speaker of the House, the next Majority Leader of the Senate will not have the luxury that Bill had. There will be no more holidays and no more delayed crises. The crises are upon us, and greatness is the last thing we can be confidently expect from our political class in response.

In general, we like President Bush and think that he has done about as well under the conditions extant in the past eight years as could have been expected, at least in terms of defending the nation. Nonetheless, he is a big government guy. At the beginning of his first term, we described him as a “tax-cut-and-spend

Republican,” and he stayed on script. As such, his bold and determined leadership in the war on terror will have to be balanced against his fecklessness on spending, his affinity for the expansion of state control, and the appearance that he took his political cues from Emperor Nero and fiddled while Rome burned.

More to the point, did you know that he is still president? You could be forgiven if you'd forgotten that. The world is falling apart and the federal government is buying up large chunks of the nation's erstwhile private financial and economic infrastructure apparently with his approval. But the man himself is virtually invisible.

Hank Paulson is the man of the hour in Washington, doling out important jobs to former Goldman underlings and doling out cash to every financial institution imaginable – save those that were direct competitors to Goldman – all without any apparent supervision. Maybe that's the way it has to be done, but it hardly speaks well of those who were put in charge by the electorate that their role in the handling of this crisis is minimal or, at the very least, appears minimal.

Not that the presidential wannabes are inspiring a great deal more confidence. Watching these two on the campaign trail, in their campaign ads, and most especially in their debates, we cannot help but be somewhat depressed by the fact that one of them is going to be our next president. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein's old saw about Oakland, while watching Obama and McCain in action, we're struck first and foremost by the fact that there is no there there.

The debate last Tuesday was particularly instructive and particularly painful. The financial world is in chaos; the global economy is sinking into recession, probably the deepest and the longest in nearly three decades; government spending is out of control and threatens the future prosperity of the nation; and a trillion dollar federal bailout already appears insufficient to calm investors' fears and to reintroduce stability into the markets. And what do we get from

Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dumber? Stump speech platitudes, campaign advisor-approved fluff, and nothing whatsoever of any substance. As the inimitable Mark Steyn put it:

Last Tuesday, we were offered the curious spectacle of two candidates both of whom essentially take the same line on this stuff – Wall Street greed, special interests, lobbyists, the usual populist boilerplate. And yet for a pair of guys who both believe in big-government solutions everything they said seemed small and tinny. Epic events swirled all around, but the two men fighting to lead the global superpower could only joust with cardboard swords: Why, Obama was such a bold leader on this issue that only two years ago he “sent a letter” to somebody or other. Why, long before Obama sent his letter, McCain “issued a statement.” Rarely has the gulf between interesting times and the paperwork of “big government” yawned so widely.

We'd like to pick on Barack Obama here, noting that the guy is the furthest left of any presidential candidate in history of the nation and, if elected, will be the furthest left of any head of state in the G8 (assuming, of course, that the Putin/Medvedev conjoined twins are merely kleptocrats and not full-blown socialists). But that tack seems too obvious, which is precisely why John McCain seems by far the smallest of these two remarkably small presidential contenders.

After months of insisting that he was too civilized to focus on Obama's past and specifically on his past associations, McCain has, over the last several weeks, finally seen the light and has started to address the likes of Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn. Good for him. Too bad he doesn't know why these issues matter.

McCain and his running mate, the ever-ebullient Sarah Palin, apparently think it's enough just to say that Obama used to hang around with people like Ayers

without explaining why anyone should care. When pressed for such an explanation, the campaign, if it is feeling forthcoming, will say that such associations are examples of Obama's "judgment" and thus should disqualify him from the presidency. We'll buy that, of course. But most voters are left wondering, "Really? Is that all you got?"

The fact of the matter is that Ayers matters for precisely the same reason that the Reverend Jeremiah Wright matters, i.e., because they demonstrate that Obama is comfortable not only with the personalities and neuroses of the far left, but with the ideas of the far left as well. Like most leftist candidates in American politics, Obama has tried quite hard to make himself appear moderate and therefore acceptable. But unlike most such candidates, Obama has a history that declares loudly and explicitly that he is anything but. He is a radical and always has been. Yet apparently John McCain can't be bothered to translate that fact into a coherent campaign message.

Barack Obama is more than just "pals" with the terrorist Ayers. He is, in many ways, a political creation of Ayers's. Obama was an unknown when he met Ayers, a run-of-the-mill political operative. Ayers sought him out to run the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, which dispersed funds specifically to radicalize Chicago's public schools and to indoctrinate students with Ayers's vision of America as oppressor. Ayers launched Obama's political career with a fundraiser at his home, and despite consistent denials from the campaign, has all but certainly remained an influential voice in Obama's political development.

This stuff matters. Ayers is an anti-war, anti-American, leftist radical. As president, Obama would be in charge of a military that is engaged in two wars and an economic apparatus that is deeply troubled and likely to precipitate the largest transfer of wealth in American history. As such, his fondness for Bill Ayers, or at the very least, his lack of repulsion at the character of Bill Ayers, is more than a case of historical "poor judgment." But if you want to hear that argument made, John McCain's not your guy.

Last week, conservative writer David Brooks called Sarah Palin "a fatal cancer to the Republican party," arguing that Palin represents a thread of Republican populism that seeks "not only to scorn liberal ideas but to scorn ideas entirely."

On the one hand, Brooks is really the story here, not Palin. Brooks, while quite smart and quite engaging, has been trying for better than a decade now to get other conservatives to acknowledge him as the indisputable intellectual force in the movement, the ideas guy to whom all good conservatives should listen. They haven't complied, and it is unsurprising therefore that he feels the need occasionally to pander to the left in his efforts to receive approval from someone.

On the other hand, his argument about "ideas" is not entirely without merit. Palin is hardly the appropriate scapegoat here, but certainly the Republican Party has, for some time, been moving away from an idea-driven movement and toward a pure, power-politics approach to elections. It's not that conservatism lacks powerful and applicable ideas; it's that today's Republican politicians are either incapable of making them or unwilling to expend the effort. Telling people that they just can't have more and more stuff is not easy and, in order to be done successfully, it requires an understanding of basic conservative principles and ideas. And too few Republicans possess such an understanding.

Of course, the point that Brooks leaves unsaid, and that his advocates on the left refuse to see, much less acknowledge, is that the GOP's rejection of idea-driven politics does not differentiate it from its Democratic rival, but, in fact, puts it in precisely the same category. The Democratic Party abandoned ideas and intellectualism decades ago. American liberalism has almost nothing whatsoever to do with ideas and has everything to do with emotion and the soothing of guilty consciences.

Again, it's hard to miss the fact that all of this will impact the current economic and financial crises. And not for the better. Assuming that the Democrats

retain and expand their majorities in both houses of Congress, the chairmen of the respective banking committees will still be Senator Chris Dodd and Congressman Barney Frank, which is to say that there is exactly zero chance that any of the real problems in the banking and mortgage industries will even be examined, much less addressed by Congress.

Dodd, you may recall, was one of the recipients of a sweetheart mortgage deal from Countrywide, one of the companies over which his committee allegedly performed oversight. Dodd has said he was unaware of the loan and his special treatment, though one could be forgiven for doubting his veracity. As the editorial board of *The Wall Street Journal* noted last week:

Former Countrywide Financial loan officer Robert Feinberg says Mr. Dodd knowingly saved thousands of dollars on his refinancing of two properties in 2003 as part of a special program the California mortgage company had for the influential. He also says he has internal company documents that prove Mr. Dodd knew he was getting preferential treatment as a friend of Angelo Mozilo, Countrywide's then-CEO.

That a "Friends of Angelo" program existed is not in dispute. It was crucial to the boom that Countrywide enjoyed before its fortunes turned. While most of the company was aggressively lending to risky borrowers and off-loading those mortgages in bulk to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Mr. Feinberg's department was charged with making sure those who could influence Fannie and Freddie's appetite for risk were sufficiently buttered up. As a Banking Committee bigshot, Mr. Dodd was perfectly placed to be buttered.

In response to the charge that he knew he was getting favors, Mr. Dodd at first issued a strong denial: "This suggestion is outrageous and contrary to my entire

career in public service. When my wife and I refinanced our loans in 2003, we did not seek or expect any favorable treatment. Just like millions of other Americans, we shopped around and received competitive rates." Less than a week later he acknowledged he was part of Countrywide's VIP program but claimed he thought it was "more of a courtesy."

Mr. Feinberg, who oversaw "Friends of Angelo" from 2000 to 2004, begs to differ. He told us that as the loan officer in charge he was supposed to make sure that the "VIP" clients knew at every step of the process that they were getting a special deal because they were "Friends of Angelo."

As for Mr. Frank, his role in this mess just grows seamier and seamier by the day. Investigative reporter Bill Sammon put it this way last week:

Unqualified home buyers were not the only ones who benefited from Massachusetts Rep. Barney Frank's efforts to deregulate Fannie Mae throughout the 1990s.

So did Frank's partner [i.e., "significant other"], a Fannie Mae executive at the forefront of the agency's push to relax lending restrictions.

Now that Fannie Mae is at the epicenter of a financial meltdown that threatens the U.S. economy, some are raising new questions about Frank's relationship with Herb Moses, who was Fannie's assistant director for product initiatives. Moses worked at the government-sponsored enterprise from 1991 to 1998, while Frank was on the House Banking Committee, which had jurisdiction over Fannie.

Both Frank and Moses assured the *Wall Street Journal* in 1992 that they took pains to avoid any conflicts of interest. Critics, however, remain skeptical.

“It’s absolutely a conflict,” said Dan Gainor, vice president of the Business & Media Institute. “He was voting on Fannie Mae at a time when he was involved with a Fannie Mae executive. How is that not germane?”

“If this had been his ex-wife and he was Republican, I would bet every penny I have - or at least what’s not in the stock market - that this would be considered germane,” added Gainor, a T. Boone Pickens Fellow. “But everybody wants to avoid it because he’s gay. It’s the quintessential double standard.”

Is there anyone in the world who believes that either Frank or Dodd will perform his “oversight” duties in any meaningful way? Is there anyone who believes that their Congressional superiors, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, respectively, will do anything to encourage the two to recuse themselves from these matters over which they so clearly have conflicts of interest? Is there anyone who believes that an Obama Justice Department will pursue appropriate criminal investigations? In short, is there anyone anywhere who really and truly believes that this will not simply be swept under rug, in the hope that the immediate crisis will pass and the causes of it can be quickly forgotten?

This then is that with which we are left. These are the leaders who shall “lead” us through the crises of the next four years. Does this instill the “confidence” that everyone says is a *sine qua non* for a return to normal? Does anyone believe that greatness will emerge from unforeseen and unexpected places?

One of the omnipresent problems in the social sciences is distinguishing between correlation and causation. It is easy to see when two variables move in conjunction

with one another. But it is much more difficult to determine if one or the other is the driver of that movement, and if so, which one.

We have seen this phenomenon in play lately with the movement of Obama in the polls and the equity markets’ slide. As Obama’s lead has grown, the markets have tumbled. The inverse probability of an Obama victory and the DJIA have moved almost in concert over the last several weeks.

Does this mean that the markets are reacting to the voters’ expressed preferences and signaling their unhappiness with a prospective Obama administration? Or does it mean that voters’ preferences are reacting to the equity markets; that is, that each new yearly low increases the electorate’s susceptibility to the argument that political “change” is necessary?

If forced to give our opinion, we’d probably say it’s more the latter than the former, though there is probably a little of both at work. In any case, determining causation is, in most cases, far from easy.

This conundrum applies as well to our discussion of American politicians and of their propensity for inadequacy. We know that the caliber of our political “leaders” is diminishing at an alarming rate. And we also know that the administrative usurpation of erstwhile democratic authority is increasing at a similarly alarming rate. But which is the driver of the movement?

Are fewer and fewer truly great or potentially great Americans going into politics because the levels of responsibility and opportunity afforded political actors have consistently decreased in the age of the administrative state? Or has the administrative state been forced to increase as rapidly as it has so as to compensate for the manifest and mounting inadequacies of the political class?

Again, we’d say it’s likely a combination of the two. As Max Weber noted, the rise of the administrative state is largely inevitable. But the meagerness of education,

particularly in the social sciences (e.g. history, rhetoric, economics), afforded most Americans – including most prospective politicians – has undoubtedly contributed to the political class’s inadequacy, thereby accelerating the bureaucratization of American politics.

In any case, none of this bodes terribly well for the immediate future of the nation. John McCain could, theoretically, still win the presidency, but in order to do so he would have to use the remaining three weeks of the campaign to make a coherent case for himself and against Barack Obama. And he has thus far not shown anything approaching the ability to do so.

As for Obama, the man is in many ways an unknown. But in terms of economics and the redistribution of wealth, his proclivities are all too clear. Given the likelihood of large majorities in both houses of Congress, Obama will be able to take us all “back to the future,” to thrust the United States into the European social welfare model at the same time that the rest of the world – including Europe – is rejecting it. Again, to borrow from Mark Steyn:

Just at the time when Europe seems to be questioning its Leftism, America will embrace it. I guess everyone needs a go at messianic politics. What irony should [Conservative Canadian Prime Minister Stephen] Harper win a majority in Canada just as Obama takes the helm to the South! I dare say, Canadian identity will simply implode at the contrast.

One can always hope that the long-term result of this severe lurch to the left will be a Gingrich-like revolution against the leftist president and a retaking of Congress in 2010. Unfortunately, it’s hard to see where the GOP will find its next Gingrich. Talk about dumbing down a concept: when even Newt Gingrich is too great a man to be replicated by the current political class, we are all indeed in serious trouble.

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