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THEY SAID IT

The journey will be difficult. The road will be long. I face this challenge with profound humility, and knowledge of my own limitations. But I also face it with limitless faith in the capacity of the American people. Because if we are willing to work for it, and fight for it, and believe in it, then I am absolutely certain that generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on earth. This was the moment – this was the time – when we came together to remake this great nation so that it may always reflect our very best selves and our highest ideals.

President-elect Barack Hussein Obama, Victory Speech After Winning Democratic Nomination, Saint Paul, Minnesota, June 3, 2008.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

We would like to begin this week by joining in the applause from the many political commentators and members of the public for president-elect Obama's efforts to assemble a politically diverse and experienced circle of cabinet members and White House staff. His actions indicate that he intends to establish himself in the early days of his presidency as a practical problem solver rather than as a slash and burn crusader for a whole new order.

This is decidedly welcome to some of us who were concerned that he might adopt a much more disruptive, opening agenda, given that he ran to the left of Hillary Clinton in the primaries, given his friendship and comfort level with a host of genuinely radical and unsavory characters and organizations, and given the enthusiastic support he received from the moonbats at moveon.org, the Daily Kos, and other far left, fringe groups.

With our newly acquired, somewhat higher comfort level with Barack's *immediate* intentions, our interest now centers on the great expectations that he has successfully nurtured among the American public.

According to a front-page article in yesterday's *Washington Post*, entitled "Optimism High About Obama Policies, Poll Finds," "more than two-thirds [of Americans polled] said they think Obama will be able to make significant improvements to the health-care system, and as many expect him to implement policies to reduce global warming – which 75 percent said he should, including half of republicans. Sixty-four percent of all those polled said Obama will be able to end U.S. involvement in Iraq. Slightly fewer than half said they

In this Issue

Great Expectations.

Defining Deviancy Down.
And Up.

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think Obama will be able to do a ‘great deal’ or ‘good amount’ to turn around the economy, but substantial proportions across party lines expect him to make an impact on economic problems that have been years in the making.”

On the one hand, this is good. An optimistic public is one of the most important ingredients in an economic recovery. On the other hand, keeping expectations within somewhat reasonable limits is one of the most important ingredients in a successful presidency. And by “successful presidency,” we are not referring solely to popularity polls, but more importantly, to the actual act of managing a large, ethnically diverse, economically and socially complex nation whose citizens have grown increasingly comfortable with a greatly expanded role for the federal establishment in their daily lives and personal happiness.

Of course, in exchange for the sacrifice of their freedoms on the altar of an omnipresent, omnipotent government, “the people” want and expect government to deliver on its promises. They want competence. And, even more importantly, they want tangible benefits. Among many other things, they want the government to ease the burden of the nagging little worries of everyday life in a modern society, like high health care costs, high energy costs, high rents and mortgage payments, pollution, crowded highways, job uncertainty, pesky little wars in far off lands, and the medically related consequences of irresponsible and immoral behavior. And, one supposes, given Barack’s specific references to these factors, they want the U.S. government to slow the rise of the oceans, to heal the planet, to provide good jobs for the jobless, to care for the sick, and to make the world love the good old U.S. of A. once again.

This desire for the federal government to take responsibility for a host of factors involved in the health and happiness of all citizens, to expand the definition of the phrase “justice for all” to encompass not simply assuring equal opportunities but equal outcomes, and even to manage the weather is not a new development. But it appears to be gaining strength at an extraordinary rate year after year,

much to the chagrin of the nation’s few remaining conservatives. We said this about it three years ago in an article entitled “The New Political Paradigm Updated.”

In a society that is obsessed with material goods and personal comfort, the American people have come to demand a federal government that is an active, dynamic participant in both of these pursuits. And not only that, they seem more than willing to pay a large share of their income and an even larger share of their personal freedom for this kind of personal government, which is increasingly replacing the roll that a personal God once played in the lives of many of them . . .

The bottom line on this is that the next election and the ones following will highlight competing claims of administrative acumen to a degree not seen in American politics since Herbert Hoover ran in 1928 as the “Wonder Boy” of governmental management, the “Great Engineer,” the man who believed in the “dynamics of mastery.”

No doubt, administrative talent is a good quality and one worth having on the resume of a U.S. president. The problem arises if the public begins to expect more than the government can deliver and then blames the shortcoming not on their unrealistic expectations but on the man in the White House. That problem could become an integral part of the new political paradigm. Indeed, it may already have become so.

In our opinion, this increasing desire for a “big brother” in Washington was the single most important factor in the public’s enthusiastic acceptance of Obama as its new leader. He alone among the many candidates seemed fully to understand the intense longing among many Americans for some sort of

secular, all-powerful godhead to whom they can pray for food in times of famine, money in times of want, comfort in times of trouble, courage in the face of the vicissitudes of life, and as the great Janis Joplin would have added, a Mercedes Benz when their friends all drive Porsches.

Of course, these are awfully big shoes to fill. But from another perspective, this pathetic dependency among a once proud and free people, known worldwide for their independent “frontier spirit,” presents an opportunity of lifetime for a dedicated leftist such as Barack Obama. The nation is in trouble on multiple fronts and “the people” are not just clamoring for someone to do something about it, but they seem willing to offer that “someone” a blank check to get it done, the keys to vault, if you will.

This means that if Barack can, with the help of his merry band of “experts,” demonstrate that the federal government is up to the task of leading the nation out of the wilderness of debt and doubt in which it finds itself today, then he will have a chance to realize the wildest dreams of his most liberal predecessors, from Franklin Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson.

He will be able to nationalize the healthcare system, lay the groundwork for an historic expansion of unionization, insure the right of abortion on demand to adults and children alike, redistribute wealth not on the basis of some phony economic formula but for the cause of “justice,” bring the captains of Wall Street and big business under the control of Washington where they belong,” turn public education into a true companion of the state’s interests, and place additional restraints on the annoying superstitions that compete with the state for the attention and loyalty of the citizenry.

Our guess is that he will fail at this task. This is based on two subjective observations. The first is that the U.S. government, as currently constituted, is not up to the task of designing and implementing the kinds of “reforms” that Barack has in mind. For one thing, there is not enough money to meet its current obligations much less to take on huge new ones. But more importantly, the U.S. Congress and

most of the executive branch agencies, including the Department of Treasury, are backwaters of ignorance and inefficiency. Indeed, they make the big three auto producers look like paragons of competence and genius.

The second observation we would make in defense of our opinion that he will fail is based on our belief that Barack has already lost the all-important battle to control public expectations. Notwithstanding his “profound humility,” and self-proclaimed “knowledge” of his own “limitations,” the fact is that he has led the public to expect grander results from him than anyone, even “the one,” can deliver in time to keep the pampered American public from turning on him, and on each other.

We’ll see.

DEFINING DEVIANCY DOWN. AND UP.

As the Bush presidency winds down, the triumphant left has begun to plan for its complete domination of the levers of power and, at the same time, has started to daydream about the ways in which it will use that power. Just as many on the right fantasized eight years ago about using the authority of the Justice Department and unfettered access to investigative materials to prosecute the purported crimes of Bill and Hillary Clinton, the left today lets its collective mind wander, and dreams about the high-profile prosecution and punishment of the “loathsome” Bushies.

Superficially, the two cases appear much the same. But only superficially. While the “Clinton-haters” hoped for the release of information contained in tax-payer-funded independent counsel investigations and the reestablishment of the rule of law, Bush’s enemies have far greater plans. Their plans are based less on evidence than on anger, ideology, and a desire for retribution. Bush, you see, is a tyrant. And a war criminal. And both he and his extra-constitutional Vice President have literally tortured the poor men and women of the world and must therefore be punished

for their “crimes against humanity,” crimes that are different perhaps in scale, but alike in malevolence to those of Hitler and other infamous war criminals.

Chief among the administration’s accusers is a man named Barton Gellman, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, who also has a new book, *The Cheney Vice Presidency*, in which he tries to make the case that Vice President Cheney not only overstepped constitutional bounds in directing wartime policy but also did so to the detriment of the nation and in the commission of official misconduct on matters such as “enhanced interrogation.” And though Gellman is the most visible figure these days, given the promotion of his book, he is hardly alone in his Bush-driven blood lust, as this excerpt from *Newsweek*’s Jonathan Tepperman demonstrates:

The United States, like many countries, has a bad habit of committing wartime excesses and an even worse record of accounting for them afterward. But a remarkable string of recent events suggests that may finally be changing – and that top Bush administration officials could soon face legal jeopardy for prisoner abuse committed under their watch in the war on terror . . .

A growing group of advocates are now . . . calling for a South African-style truth and reconciliation commission. Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, says that although “we know what went on,” “knowledge and a change in practices are not sufficient: there must be acknowledgment and repudiation as well.” He favors the creation of a nonpartisan commission of inquiry with a professional staff and subpoena power, calling it “the only way to definitively repudiate this ugly chapter in U.S. history.”

But for those interested in tougher sanctions, one other possibility looms. Michael Ratner, president of the Center

for Constitutional Rights and author of *The Trial of Donald Rumsfeld*, points out that over 20 countries now have universal jurisdiction laws that would allow them to indict U.S. officials for torture if America doesn’t do it itself. A few such cases were attempted in recent years but were dropped, reportedly under U.S. pressure. Now the Obama administration may be less likely to stand in their way. This doesn’t mean it will extradite Cheney and Co. to stand trial abroad. But at the very least, the threat of such suits could soon force Bush aides to think twice before buying plane tickets.

To put it gently, this is nuts. The very idea of prosecuting American officials for conducting an amorphous war against an equally amorphous enemy and, moreover, doing it successfully, at least in terms of preventing that enemy from striking again on American soil, is absurd. That Secretary Rumsfeld or Vice President Cheney could be seized while abroad, like the poor, pathetic Augusto Pinochet, is chilling, a possibility that should give all Americans and especially all elected and bureaucratic officials serious pause. Nuts, we tell you, so nuts that we were initially inclined to dismiss this as just another sign of the left’s ongoing “descent into madness,” which we’ve documented in these pages for many years now.

But upon reflection, we think there’s something else going on here, something more substantial and more important than just the loss of reason by a handful of kooks on the far left; something that will likely have an impact on the conduct and effectiveness of foreign and domestic policy for years to come.

Fifteen years ago, the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the last of our intellectuals-cum-politicians, wrote an article on society, sociology, and communal breakdown. The title of that piece, “Defining Deviancy Down,” gave birth to a new phrase and a largely unexplored concept in the study of cultural degradation and the coarsening of society. The gist of the argument is that various examples of excuse-making and rationalizing by social scientists

and their political co-believers has led society to accept previously detested behavior and, moreover, continuously to ratchet down the standards of societal acceptability. To wit:

Social scientists are said to be on the lookout for poor fellows getting a bum rap. But here is a theory that clearly implies that there are circumstances in which society will choose not to notice behavior that would be otherwise controlled, or disapproved, or even punished.

It appears to me that this is in fact what we in the United States have been doing of late. I proffer the thesis that, over the past generation, since the time [Kai T.] Erikson wrote, the amount of deviant behavior in American society has increased beyond the levels the community can “afford to recognize” and that, accordingly, we have been re-defining deviancy so as to exempt much conduct previously stigmatized, and also quietly raising the “normal” level in categories where behavior is now abnormal by any earlier standard.

In the years since its publication, Moynihan’s theory has underpinned much of the discussion about and battles involved in the “culture wars” that have come to dominate American politics. And there can be little doubt that the late Senator was right, and that the willingness to “define deviancy down” or constantly to shift the limits of acceptable behavior is one of the greatest challenges for a society that both wishes to maintain civil discourse among its various factions and wishes to stave off irreversible civilizational decay.

But despite its obvious brilliance, Moynihan’s thesis covered only half of the explanation for the increase in animosity among competing political parties. The other half, naturally, is the opposite, ‘defining deviancy up,’ described here in a January 2000 piece by the columnist (and psychiatrist) Charles Krauthammer:

There is a complimentary social phenomenon that goes with defining deviancy down. As part of the vast social project of moral leveling, it is not enough for the deviant to be normalized. The normal must be found to be deviant. Therefore, while for the criminals and the crazies deviancy has been defined down (the bar defining normality has been lowered), for the ordinary bourgeois deviancy has been defined up (the bar defining normality has been raised). Large areas of ordinary behavior hitherto considered benign have had their threshold radically redefined up, so that once innocent behavior now stands condemned as deviant.

Now, we’ll grant that this is more than a little subjective, but we’d also argue that there is a great deal of truth involved, politics notwithstanding. The 1990s and the Clinton administration, both began as part of a grand episode of defining deviancy up, of the “year of the woman,” of the rebellion against the patriarchy and against the likes of Clarence Thomas and against “sexual harassment” defined infinitely upward. But both ended as a case study in defining deviancy down, as Senator Moynihan himself later lamented, if not in so many words.

Screwing around with interns in the White House? Well . . . the Europeans do much the same thing all the time, so only a prudish hayseed could be opposed. Lying to your wife, cabinet, and the public about said intern? Well . . . what was he supposed to do? Ken Starr made him do it. Lying to the grand jury about the extent of the relationship and carefully construing answers, right down to insisting on a specific definition of “is”? Well . . . again, it’s someone else’s fault; the guy was just trying to protect his family. Besides perjury “about sex” is no big deal anyway. And so on.

When all was said and done, even the feminists, so upset about references to alleged hairs on Coke cans just a handful of years earlier, had come to the

conclusion that men – at least powerful pro-choice men – were entitled to “one free grope” before they started infringing on women’s rights.

By contrast, the last eight years and the Bush presidency were exclusively about defining deviancy up. Consider, for example, the aforementioned “crimes” committed by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, et al.

For starters, the intelligence gathering, the interrogations, the detention and punishment of enemy combatants, all of that which purportedly expose administration members to war crimes tribunals, were astoundingly mild both by contrast to those employed in the rest of the world and by historical standards. War is hell, as they say, and it requires some determined and unpleasant action. As the apocryphal quote (sometimes attributed to Churchill, other times to Orwell) has it, “We sleep safe in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm.”

Not only did liberal icon Franklin Roosevelt and conservative icon Abraham Lincoln both do far, far worse during their own wartime presidencies, but all of the actions taken by the administration were at least grounded in legal arguments. Sometimes those arguments proved insufficient and were overruled by civilian courts. But that very fact – the fact that they were subjected to checks and balances – is itself proof of the administration’s complicity with legal norms and its desire to maintain traditional standards of conduct.

Additionally, all of the purportedly “dangerous” intelligence gathering was applied on a very limited basis and in concert with specific, detailed guidelines. If you were taking phone calls from Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, the National Security Agency just wanted to know why. And if you were consulting on Osama’s liver problems and not plotting to blow up the Sears tower, you were off the hook. “Ordinary” Americans were never involved, and there is no evidence that the administration ever sought to use any of the information gathered for anything other than entirely legitimate national security purposes.

All of that notwithstanding, the whistleblowers who broke the law and violated their oaths are hailed as heroes. And the spooks and their bosses, the guys who kept the bombs from blowing up, are criminals, traitors even. The men who directed them are war criminals, Hitler-esque in their violations of human rights, men to be despised and scorned throughout the world and throughout the ages, monsters in need of fitting punishment. Talk about your redefinitions of deviancy.

None of this has been accidental, by the way. In many ways, these are carefully contrived and precisely calibrated redefinitions of acceptable behavior, designed to elicit specific results. By increasing the populace’s tolerance of erstwhile deviant behavior with regard to personal proclivities, sexual “eccentricities,” and standards of conduct, the ultimate goal is to change society’s responses to said behaviors. As Moynihan himself argued, there are three modes of redefinition, one of which is particularly relevant here. Moynihan calls it the “opportunistic” mode of redefinition and writes that it “reveals at most a nominal intent to do good.” He continues:

The true object is to do well, a long-established motivation among mortals. In this pattern, a growth in deviancy makes possible a transfer of resources, including prestige, to those who control the deviant population. This control would be jeopardized if any serious effort were made to reduce the deviancy in question. This leads to assorted strategies for re-defining the behavior in question as not all that deviant, really.

In terms of governance, what this means is that the opportunistic redefinition allows one to appropriate resources, to “invest” those resources, and, in the process, to expand the size and scope of government. It allows one to change the definitions of the problems faced and thus to change the proposed solutions. The problem isn’t sexual promiscuity among unmarried teens, for example. It’s poverty. And thus the solution isn’t a re-emphasis of chastity,

family responsibility, and decency, but rather more government efforts to eradicate poverty and broaden opportunity by “spreading the wealth.”

On the flip side, by increasing the cultural intolerance of intelligence gathering, interrogations, fair treatment of enemies, and the behavior of soldiers on the battle field – in short, the conduct of war – the ultimate goal is also to change society’s responses to said behaviors, to make the conduct of war itself intolerable.

As things stand today, the United States armed forces – right up to the commander-in-chief – constitute the most decent and most civilian-conscious *effective* military in the history of the world. Of this there can be doubt. Other forces, the Europeans for example, may be more delicate. But the key word here is “effective.” Anyone can avoid inflicting unnecessary casualties or causing undo distress if he or she avoids combat altogether. But as far as actual fighting forces are concerned, no army has ever been or likely could ever be as conscientious as is the United States military – and that extends from combat to interrogation to detention, all the way up the military ladder to the White House itself.

The intention then is not to ensure fairness or decency, but to ensure that fairness and decency are not sufficient for tolerable military action, thereby rendering military action or “Western neo-imperialism” itself entirely intolerable. No more war. No blood for oil. Yankee go home, and all the rest.

One might be inclined to believe that the defining upward of deviancy with regard to the conduct of foreign policy is an attempt merely to castigate Republicans who, after all, have been in charge of foreign policy for the last eight years. We suppose that’s a possibility. And certainly there has been some change of attitude about erstwhile forbidden behaviors (e.g. keeping prisoners at Guantanamo) since the election of Barack Obama.

Still, foreign policy will technically be the portfolio directed by Hillary Clinton, for whom those most intent on redefining deviancy have no deep affection. If they sully her in the process of sullyng the very idea of pre-emptive defense war, chalk that up to the old two birds-one stone idea.

What we will be left with in sum, then, is a society that is more tolerant of corruption and deviancy with regard to personal behavior; more willing to expend the power and capital of government to effect solutions largely unrelated to the problems to be addressed; and far less willing to defend itself, to muster up the proverbial “stomach for a fight.” In short, Europe.

The West’s decay has long been documented and has taken many forms. But perhaps the most discussed and the most pernicious is the civilizational unwillingness to preserve its heritage and values, to defend them from encroachment – from within and without. The United States has always been different to some extent on this account, willing at least to make some effort, despite the protestations of large swaths of its disgruntled population. The question is whether Americans are still thusly willing. And judging by the redefinition of deviancy, in both directions, we’re not terribly optimistic.

The inimitable Mark Steyn wrote recently that “If September 11th 2001 was ‘the day everything changed,’ November 4th 2008 was the day everything changed back . . .” This is not a commentary on President-elect Obama necessarily, but on the electorate that voted for him. That electorate is weary. Maintaining civilization is hard work. And maintaining the standards of behavior that underpin that civilization is hard work as well. It’s time for a break, we guess.

Stay tuned to see how that works out.

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