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THEY SAID IT

Ben looked at his watch - shook his head
We may make Atlanta but we'll all be dead
The train was flyin' by the troublin' switch
Without any warning then she took the ditch
Yea! she went in the ditch - well, she took the ditch
Without any warning - then she took the ditch.

The big locomotive leaped from the rail
Ben never lived to tell that awful tale
His life was ended and his work was done
When Ben Dewberry made his final run
He made his final run - he made his final run
When Ben Dewberry made his final run.

"Ben Dewberry's Final Run," Blind Andy Jenkins, c. 1908.

PUT YOUR HEAD OUT THE WINDOW, WATCH THE DRIVERS ROLL.

It looks very much as though the United States is headed for a train wreck, or perhaps a series of train wrecks. Unfortunately, there is no way to predict where and when these are going to occur, or how serious any one of them is likely to be.

We know, for example, that the federal government is trillions, literally trillions of dollars short of having enough money to honor all the commitments that it has made to its citizens, and upon which most of these citizens have planned their retirement. We also know that the time is fast approaching when this will become apparent to even the most dimwitted among them.

What we don't know yet is which individuals will get stiffed when the shortfall becomes critical. More importantly, we don't know how these stiffees will react to the disappointment and hardship they will suffer as a result. We think it is reasonable for anyone who has put aside a little money over the years to expect to be means-tested out of the full sum of his or her government "entitlement." And we think it is reasonable to expect that these individuals will begin soon to withdraw political support for any and all of these soon-to-be-means-tested federal programs. And this could cause the upcoming entitlement-related train wreck to occur earlier than the demographers expect. In any case, there's clearly a train wreck coming.

It is worth keeping in mind while considering this that the Obama administration's housing foreclosure plan for the vaguely defined "deserving poor" and tax increases for the vaguely defined "rich" is already aggravating the growing distrust of the federal government. Our advice, if he were to ask us, which he won't, would be to avoid going overboard with this redistributionist strategy because the result will be to make "the poor" even poorer. And if he were to ask why we believe this, we would cite the following wisdom from liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith: "When the horses die in the street, the oats no longer pass through to the sparrows."

So what else do we know? Well, we know that Barack's economic recovery plan is not just a "Hail Mary" pass, but an extremely unconventional one. Perhaps the adjective "nuts," would be a more fitting description of a plan that includes raising taxes during a recession and that attempts to differentiate between the "deserving poor" and the deadbeats. We also know, given the haphazard manner in which Barack, Nancy, and Harry came up with Plan A that there is no Plan B.

Now this is not unusual for government work. Many years ago, a bunch of us were visiting a senior official in the Office of Management and Budget and someone asked him what the administration would do if its current economic plan didn't work, i.e., what was the fallback position. The young man sat back in his seat, placed his palms together in front of him in a contemplative manner, and asked the inquisitor if he played bridge. The fellow said he did. To which the government official said the following: "If you're playing bridge and the only way you can make your contract is if the Queen of Spades is in the East, you play the hand as though the Queen of Spades is in the East." He didn't say it, but the bottom line is that if the Queen of Spades is not in East, the consequence is a train wreck.

That comment way back then was somewhat disturbing. But less so than the current situation because everyone in the room on that day not only wanted the economic plan to "work," but agreed on the meaning of the phrase "to work." The problem in the current case is that no one knows if the Barack crowd is operating with the same definition of the term "to work" as the rest of us. Clearly, it would seem that there are many elements in their economic game plan that reflect his chief of staff Rahm Emanuel's now-famous remark that one should never let a good crisis go to waste. And this raises all sorts of questions about whether the Obama White House will view the upcoming train wrecks as catastrophes or, to borrow a phrase from Lenin, as the breaking of a few eggs in order to make an omelet.

For example, from the perspective of a liberal, big-government redistributionist like Barack, would an

economic downturn severe enough to require the *de facto* nationalization of the nation's banks be viewed as a catastrophe or the welcome upshot of a "good crisis?" Would severe problems in the housing sector be viewed as a critical economic condition or a fortunate pretext for providing millions of dollars of government subsidies to Barack's friends and former colleagues at the deeply corrupt, left wing ACORN group? We don't know.

We do know that Ed Yardeni's global bond vigilantes will eventually protect themselves against the indiscriminate printing of money by the United States government. We don't know what their tolerance level is, but we suspect it would be visible on the horizon today even through a cheap telescope, say a Red Ryder or a Sky King model that you got with ten cents and Wheaties box top during the 1950s. We also know that when these vigilantes do react, private sector borrowers will be the first to know. This particular train wreck will be known as "squeezing out."

We know too that there is zero chance that Hillary Clinton, America's new Talleyrand, is going to convince Iran to abandon its plans to build a nuclear bomb or to convince the Israelis that an Iranian bomb is no big deal. We don't know when the showdown between Iran and Israel will occur, but we suspect it won't be long. We don't know whether the United States will stand behind Israel when High Noon arrives. But we do know that, like Gary Cooper, Israel will face the bad guys alone if it has to. We also know that somewhere in Israel there is a doomsday button with a sign above it that says, "Last one out, push this!" Now *that* would be a train wreck of astonishing magnitude.

Finally, we know that America's new wartime president has committed the United States to victory in Afghanistan. We don't know why he did this so forcefully, given his early opposition to victory in Iraq, but we know he did. We also know that honoring this commitment will require wisdom, courage, determination, a good poker sense, and the ability to keep the American people behind the effort when the going gets tough, which it most certainly will over the next several years, if, of course, he sticks to his

insistence on victory. Given that Barack has only had four weeks of high-level executive experience in his entire career, we don't know if he has any of these qualities. We do know that if he fails, the Islamists will emerge from Barack's four years in the White House stronger and more dangerous than they have ever been.

Now we know that this is a gloomy outlook. So to end on a slightly more positive note, we would simply point out that this train – to continue the analogy -- has been careening, recklessly down the track toward a catastrophic wreck for almost 50 years now. Which leads us to offer two observations. The first is that no one should be surprised by any of this. The second is that if the upcoming train wrecks do not destroy the nation, they might make it stronger by calling attention to the need for some sort of adult supervision in Washington before it is too late.

A CLASH OF MORAL SYSTEMS, AD NAUSEAM.

The election of Barack Obama this past November was a huge and important victory for many on the political left, and not just for all the usual reasons. Yes, they are happy to have one of their own in charge again. And yes, they are pleased as punch to repulse the right-wing assault and to reduce the GOP to little more than a regional party. And of course, they can barely control their excitement at the prospect of conducting investigation after investigation and holding various “truth commissions” to attack, harass, discredit, and pummel members of the Bush administration, most especially the so-called “neo-cons,” whom they blame for leading the nation into two purportedly unnecessary and ultimately destructive wars.

But above and beyond all that, many on the left were happy about Barack Obama the man (as opposed to the politician), and specifically for what he represents to the political discourse and to the broader conception of American society. And here again, not just for the standard reasons. Of course, his race was and is a big deal, but there's more, much more, to the cultural component of his victory than that, at least in the eyes of many of his most ardent supporters.

Recall, if you will, that the 2004 presidential contest, won by George W. Bush despite tanking approval numbers and a then-increasingly unpopular war, was purportedly decided by those whom the pollsters and analysts labeled “values-voters.” By an overwhelming margin, John Kerry lost those voters who thought that ethics, morality, and personal reliability mattered. Indeed, it is likely that he lost the election specifically because of them. It was the culture, stupid. And the culture kicked Kerry and his fellow partisans squarely in the backside.

In response, many Democrats, including the current Speaker of the House and the current Secretary of State, decided that they had to fight the Republicans on their own turf; that they had, at the very least, to make a play for the values voters. Unfortunately for them, none did so effectively, which is to say without appearing condescending and phony. And many looked like fools in the process.

And then came Barack.

For all his faults, Barack Obama appears for all the world to be genuinely, earnestly, and devoutly religious. More specifically, he appears to be genuinely, earnestly, and devoutly Christian. True, his version of Christianity may not square well with our version or your version or other, more orthodox versions. But there is no questioning the sincerity of his belief or, more to the point, his ability to convey that belief to voters. Where Nancy Pelosi and Hillary Clinton failed to connect with religious voters, despite their repeated efforts, Obama was able to make such a connection and to make it with no effort at all.

Indeed, Obama's ease with religion, his ability to empathize with religious voters, and his willingness to stand up to the far left in defense of religion – perhaps best exemplified by his invitation to evangelical minister Rick Warren to give the invocation at his inauguration – have convinced many of his supporters that he can permanently alter the course of the religious and cultural debate and thus permanently alter the electoral fortunes of the two major political parties.

From this perspective, if the Republican Revolution was built in large part on the so-called “culture wars” and on religious conflict specifically, then a Democrat who is comfortable with religion and who can reach out to religious conservatives could also end the GOP’s dominance among religious voters and reverse said revolution. In short, many Democrats believe that Obama can end the culture wars.

This belief was perhaps best expressed by Peter Beinart, a columnist, blogger, and the former editor of the left-of-center *New Republic*, who, about a week after the new President was inaugurated, penned a piece appropriately enough titled “The End of the Culture Wars,” in which he predicted that “Barack Obama’s greatest feat may be ending the ruinous, decades-long battle over race and religion that has plagued the Democratic Party.”

Beinart made numerous points similar to those we made above about Obama’s ease and grace with religion and with the language of the faithful. But the key to his thesis, and in fact to the entire liberal left understanding of the culture wars, can be summed up by his use of the phrase “battle over race and religion.” To Beinart and to the left, that’s *all* that the culture wars are about. Period. End of discussion. Breaking it down to its simplest elements, to the left, the culture wars began after the Democrats passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, thereby alienating “redneck” southerners, and picked up steam in 1973, after the left-leaning Burger Court radicalized abortion politics with its ruling in *Roe v. Wade*.

Or to put this in another way, the left has *always* viewed the cultural wars as being about nothing more than ignorant racists and equally ignorant religious zealots, who are unable to accept the changing nature of American society and thus have always clung desperately to their guns, their religion and their long-held prejudices (to paraphrase Obama himself).

Given this, it’s easy to see why people like Beinart would expect Obama to end the culture wars to the Democrats’ advantage. The racial issues of the early ‘90s – crime affirmative action, etc. – have grown markedly less important and markedly less politically

volatile. And certainly Obama himself is living proof that working-class whites have nothing to fear from blacks, who, as anyone can see, want exactly the same things for themselves and for their families as everyone else does. Moreover, Obama can actually connect with the culture warriors on their own terms. Or as Beinart puts it, “Obama was more successful than John Kerry in reaching out to moderate white evangelicals in part because he struck them as more authentically Christian.” In Obama, the racial and religious divides of the past few decades have been bridged, meaning that the culture wars themselves may now be ended peaceably. Or so the theory goes.

Of course, the big problem with this analysis is that it is just flat wrong. Beinart, like nearly every other left-leaning columnist, politician, political strategist, prognosticator, political activist, and talking head, completely and utterly misunderstands the culture wars, preferring to lay the blame for the “decades-long battle” at the feet of his political adversaries and to assume that their hostility to the leftist agenda is based on ignorance and misunderstanding rather than actual, concrete objections to the course and the coarseness of modern society.

As we have argued countless times in these page, anyone who believes that the so-called culture wars constitute a phenomenon of recent vintage, who believes that their tale can be summed up as a “decades-long battle” has very little understanding of history and even less understanding of the intellectual, religious, and ideological conflicts that have characterized Western civilization for centuries, nay millennia.

These “culture wars” are little more than the modern manifestations of the omnipresent and heretofore irresolvable clash between competing moral systems; between the pre-modern and the post-modern; between those who believe in absolute truth as described in the Decalogue and the New Testament and those who believe that truth is a human construct, the outward expression of will and power; between those who see salvation as an individual aspiration and those who see it ultimately as a collective goal.

Beinart and much of the left see the modern clashes between left and right as expressions of racial tension and religious fervor. And certainly, that is how they've manifested in the political dialogue. At their heart, however, all, or nearly all of these conflicts can be broken down into disagreements over responsibility and whether, in a just society, this responsibility is borne by the individual or the collective.

Let's take, for example, Beinart's discussion of race. He mentions crime, welfare, and affirmative action as three issues that were crucial to any understanding of the culture wars in the 1980s and early '90s. Beinart argues that working class whites, Reagan Democrats if you will, saw "government in almost wholly racial terms" and saw the cultural conflicts in simple terms of "black versus white." But this is, we believe, a misreading of the culture and of the sentiments of the culturally disaffected. The conflict may well have been over race *per se*, but the concern of the culture warriors revolved more around responsibility for racial grievances and their remedies.

On the matter of crime, the left insisted that societal "root causes" led to crime and that responsibility for individual actions should therefore be borne by society as a whole. The right, naturally, demurred. On the matter of welfare, the left again argued that root causes were to blame, while the right expected everyone to make an effort to feed and clothe himself and his family and to earn his own way. Finally, on affirmative action, the left insisted that despite the legal and procedural progress made by blacks in the years since the Civil Rights, the societal "playing field" remained uneven and that minorities therefore needed a codified and consistent advantage over *working-class whites* in particular to enjoy the full benefits of the society. The right, by contrast, saw this as "affirmative discrimination" and believed that decisions about education and employment should be made on the basis of merit and that applicants should be judged as individuals rather than members of a designated category.

Beinart also claims that the culture wars "morphed" from conflicts over race in the '80s to clashes over religion in the '90s. He describes no mechanism

for this transformation, and merely insists that it happened. But again, he is missing the point.

Here, Beinart mentions abortion, the quintessential example of the culture wars' religious component. But again, he's mistaken, failing to see that even this issue revolves around competing conceptions of responsibility rather than religion *per se*. The pro-choice side argues not only that society has an absolute obligation to enforce women's "rights" by protecting their ability to obtain abortions, but that the denial of that "right" would be a monumental societal step backward, permitting men once again to oppress women by controlling their bodies and thus their lives.

The pro-life side, by contrast, sees abortion as an individual decision, as the individual abdication of responsibility for the consequences associated with sexual intercourse, which should have been contemplated *before* the act rather than after it. Indeed, the reason that many on the anti-abortion side agree to make exceptions for cases of incest and rape is because they acknowledge that such cases involve mental and/or physical coercion, meaning that the mother had no choice in the commission of the act and therefore bears no moral responsibility for it.

Beinart continues, discussing the 42nd President of the United States and claiming that "The impeachment of Bill Clinton was not a racial battle, but a battle over what standard of public morality would govern political behavior." He's right, of course, but again, he doesn't seem to grasp that the issue was responsibility, not "mere sex." Bill Clinton seduced, defiled, and then tried to defame a 21-year-old-girl who worked for him at the White House. And when he got caught, he tried to shift the blame for his own actions to prurient prosecutors and prudish parliamentarians. The problem wasn't his behavior, you see. The problem was Kenneth Starr, the Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy, and the Republican legislators and leaders who were obsessed with him and with his sex life. He wanted to take no responsibility either for his vile behavior or for the crimes he committed in covering them up. His "tormentors" of course, simply wanted a grown man to act like one, to accept responsibility for cheating on

his wife, for despoiling a young girl, for defaming that same girl, for misleading prosecutors, and for lying to a federal grand jury while under oath.

We could continue, but we think we've made our point. The culture wars manifest in different ways and on different issues, but at root, they represent a clash of moral systems, one of the chief components of which is a fundamental disagreement over the role of the individual in society.

What's the upshot of all of this, you ask? What does it mean for Barack Obama and the future of the culture wars?

What it means is that people like Peter Beinart, who expect Obama to end or at least to calm these clashes, are going to be sorely disappointed. In only five weeks, Obama has more than made it clear that he will all but certainly exacerbate the culture wars, adding yet another manifestation to the ever-present conflict.

Anyone who has paid even the remotest attention to the popular reaction given President Obama's recent policy decisions understands full well that there is a battle brewing. Poll after poll after poll show that significant swaths of the public oppose the economic "stimulus" bill, oppose the housing bailout proposal, and downright detest the idea of any further aid for the automakers in Detroit. All around the country, people are angry about the instantaneous doubling of the deficit and the perception that those who created this economic crisis will nonetheless be "rewarded" for doing so. Taxpayer protests have sprung up around the country, in places as diverse as Seattle, Denver, and Johnson County, Kansas. Right-wing talk show hosts, most notably, Fox News's Glen Beck are openly discussing the potential for outright civil disobedience.

Now, guys like Beck are clearly on the fringe. But, at the same time, there is considerable populist opposition to Obama's agenda. And, like it or not,

this opposition centers on the concept of individual responsibility. Perhaps nothing captured this sentiment better than the now-famous trading-floor rant by CNBC analyst Rick Santelli, who railed, on the air, about the Obama housing proposal's facilitation of moral hazard and the fact that it "encourages bad behavior." No one – not Santelli, not Newt Gingrich, not Mark Melcher and Steve Soukup – wants to see people evicted from their homes. But, at the same time, no one who bought a house he could afford and who bought a car he could afford and who bought a TV he could afford, wants to see those who bought more than they could afford and who abused easy credit to be rewarded for that abuse. And certainly, no one who has been responsible wants his money to be taken to subsidize the irresponsible. There is real anger at work in the populace, and it focuses on individual responsibility.

It is no coincidence, we think, that the states in which housing foreclosures are the greatest are also "blue states," some of which (i.e. California and Michigan) have been blue for as long as anyone can remember. They were blue when the culture wars focused on crime and affirmative action in the early '90s. They were blue when the conflicts "shifted" (ala Beinart) to religion and religious matters in the late '90s and the early part of this decade. And they are blue today, when the cultural battlefield has shifted again to housing, credit, and responsibility for one's own use and abuse of economic resources.

In other words, the culture wars have maintained their core causes, just as they have maintained their core constituencies, on both sides of the battle. Peter Beinart and others on the left may not get this, but it's undeniable, and the electoral maps prove it.

The culture wars aren't over. Indeed, they're just getting warmed up.

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