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THEY SAID IT

Men who undertake considerable things, even in a regular way, ought to give us ground to presume ability. But the physician of the state, who, not satisfied with the cure of distempers, undertakes to regenerate constitutions, ought to shew uncommon powers. Some very unusual appearances of wisdom ought to display themselves on the face of the designs of those who appeal to no practice, and who copy after no model.

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1881.

In this Issue

Catastrophe, Thy Name Is
Incompetence

That's Entertainment.

CATASTROPHE, THY NAME IS INCOMPETENCE.

There were two major concerns among conservatives when Barack Obama won the presidency. The first was socialism. This was understandable given his prior associations with the radical left, his advocacy of aggressive wealth redistribution, and his fondness for ever-larger government. The second, related concern was that he would deliberately exacerbate the nation's on-going economic problems in order to create a heightened atmosphere of urgency that would allow him to speed up implementation of his socialist agenda.

The first of these concerns is still legitimate. The second has been rendered all but meaningless by events. Why? Because the "serious crisis" that White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel didn't want to "go to waste," is already white-hot and it would hardly be in Barack's best interests at this point to add fuel to the fire. But this is all rapidly becoming yesterday's news in the face of a growing body of evidence that there is a new and potentially more immediate threat than either of those mentioned above. This new threat is called "incompetence," defined as lacking the skill sets necessary to perform a specific job.

You see, socialism has been around for a long time. You can understand it, plan for it, and fight against it with logic and solid historical evidence. And in the early days of a socialist regime, before the rot spreads throughout the system, you can even plan an investment portfolio around it by avoiding those industries that will suffer immediately at the hands of the social engineers and by buying companies that will reap the immediate spoils of the folly.

On the other hand, there is little or no defense against incompetence. It strikes randomly. One cannot plan for amateurish mistakes, bizarre behavior, and poor judgment. It is uncomfortable just to watch it in action. And it is pure hell on capital markets, which can deal with almost anything except that kind of uncertainty.

It is possible, of course, that fear of Obama's incompetence will prove to be unwarranted; that he is as brilliant as his supporters say; that he has a divinely inspired blueprint for a new kind of society, socially and economically healthy with liberty and justice for all, by order of the government.

But given the extremely high stakes involved and the fact that Obama himself has used the term "catastrophe" to describe the guaranteed consequences of not taking what can only be described as heroic measures to correct the "mess" that he attributes to the errors of his predecessor, it would be foolhardy to ignore at least the possibility that he is going to make things worse rather than better.

After all, his resume reveals no significant management experience in any field whatsoever and no special excellence in any activity other than political campaigning. His knowledge of economics appears to be limited to a childlike partiality for the outmoded theories of John Maynard Keynes. His ability to think on his feet is so limited that he needs a teleprompter to help him to say "thank you for inviting me here" and to keep him from putting his foot in his mouth when having a light conversation with a late night, television comedian. Moreover, his thoughts on foreign policy bring to mind Eric Voegelin's description of the liberal dream world.

In this world, Voegelin states, a nation will pledge itself to various unrealistic social idealisms, "such as the abolition of such phenomena as war, fear, want and the unequal distribution of property." But, because it operates in a dream world, it will fail to meet real dangers in the real world with appropriate action. "They will rather be met by magic operations in the dream world, such as disapproval, moral condemnation, declarations of intention, resolutions, appeals to the opinion of mankind, branding of enemies as aggressors, outlawing of war, propaganda for world peace and world government, etc." Eventually, Voegelin says, measures taken which are intended to establish peace increase the disturbances that will lead to war. He continues:

In the Gnostic dream world . . . nonrecognition of reality is the first principle. As a consequence, types of action which in the real world would be considered as morally insane because of the real effects which they have will be considered moral in the dream world because they intended an entirely different effect. The gap between intended and real effect will be imputed not to the Gnostic immorality of ignoring the structure of reality but to the immorality of some other person or society that does not behave as it should behave according to the dream conception of cause and effect. The interpretation of moral insanity as morality, and of the virtues of sophia [wisdom] and prudentia [practical wisdom, or prudence] as immortality, is a confusion difficult to unravel. And the task is not facilitated by the readiness of the dreamers to stigmatize the attempt at critical clarification as an immoral enterprise.

Finally, Barack seems to have little or no understanding of or respect for that which Patrick Henry once described as the "lamp of experience," i.e., that great storehouse of knowledge and wisdom and custom and tradition upon which America's founding fathers constructed the government that has served Americans so well for the past two centuries.

How else can one explain his dimwitted obsession with destroying rather than repairing the foundations upon which the nation's free market economic and democratic social systems have rested for over 200 years now? One thinks of T.S. Eliot's famous observation that we are "destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans."

Burke described his concern over men such as this, as follows.

We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.

Russell Kirk echoed Burke thusly in his great classic *Roots of American Order*.

The roots of [American] order twist back to the Hebrew perceptions of a purposeful moral existence under God. They extend to the philosophical and political self-awareness of the old Greeks. They are nurtured by the Roman experience of law and social organization. They are entwined with the Christian understanding of human duties and human hopes, of man redeemed. They are quickened by medieval custom, learning, and valor. They grip the religious ferment of the sixteenth century. They come from the ground of English liberty under law, so painfully achieved. They are secured by a century and half of community in colonial America. They benefit from the debates of the eighteenth century. They approach the surface through Declaration and Constitution. They emerge full of life from the ordeal of the Civil War. *“A reformer hewing so near to the tree’s root never knows how much he may be felling,”* [emphasis added] George Santayana remarked, by way of caution in 1915.

As we noted above, it is difficult to protect oneself, one’s family, and one’s property from the perils of leadership by persons who do not have the proper training to lead. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid this situation in a modern day democracy where “the people” choose their leaders based on a contest that favors characteristics that have little or nothing to do with the job requirements.

Needless to say, the founding fathers were not oblivious to this problem. In fact, they larded the system with “checks and balances,” designed to work as an automatic shutdown apparatus that would prevent further damage to the mechanism when some important part fails. Today, we call this failsafe mechanism “gridlock” and bless the founders for the wisdom that they displayed when they created it.

Last week, we called attention to the sad irony associated with the fact that White House spokesman Robert Gibbs’s statement that “there’s no safer investment in the world than in the United States,” was true, even though his president was printing dollars like they were going out of style.

This week we will note the equally sad irony in the fact that gridlock is undoubtedly the most optimistic scenario that one can conjure up for the most powerful nation in the world in the next few years.

THAT’S ENTERTAINMENT.

We know that we’re a little tardy with this, but better late than never. Right? Anyway, we owe President Bush an apology. And we do so right now. For what? Well, we badgered him mercilessly for six years for not performing what we routinely described as the single most important task of a Commander-in-Chief during wartime, namely keeping domestic morale high and convincingly communicating the necessity of the effort to the community at large.

Throughout the last six-plus years of the Bush administration, the American military in Iraq performed spectacularly, doing its duty, destroying its enemies, fostering a fledgling democracy, and doing all this with a previously unimaginable dearth of casualties. Yet the American public lost faith quickly and, in large measure, never regained it. And we blamed Bush. Mistakenly, we now believe. Watching his successor bounce from story to story, from position to position, from outrage to outrage, trying desperately just to stay afloat, it occurs to us that President Bush really didn’t have much more of a chance than this guy does.

The problem, in retrospect, was the American public, not the man trying to hold its limited attention. When the public couldn’t focus on Iraq, we assumed that Bush had screwed up. We would now argue the fault lies with the fact that the American public has the attention span of an amoeba.

Of course, we’re not exactly breaking any news here. You’ve heard it all before: the 24-hour news cycle, the “all-news” networks, the competition among alleged journalists to make headlines and garner ratings, all contribute to the “sensationalization” of politics and

exacerbate the attention-deficit problems that are characteristic of the Baby Boomers, the Gen-X'ers, and especially the Millennium Generation. People are looking for constant stimulation – not mental stimulation, mind you, but visual, auditory, and sensory stimulation.

Why did George W. Bush have to struggle to sell the second Iraq war when his father had little trouble selling the first one? In large part because the second war went on too long and didn't have enough cool videos of smart bombs blowing up buildings and targeting specific individuals from 30,000 feet up.

Put simply, people aren't looking to be governed. They're looking to be entertained. And when it's not entertaining anymore, they're not interested anymore.

Along these lines, we once had great hopes for George Bush. During his run for the White House in 2000, we wrote that if pictures of him, drunk, dancing naked on a bar existed, his campaign should circulate them; and if they didn't exist, his campaign should have some taken. As it turned out, that wasn't necessary, since George was actually a pretty entertaining guy, pictures or no pictures. In any case, he was certainly more entertaining than his opponent, whose name, fittingly enough, rhymes with "bore."

The events of 9/11 changed all of this, though, and George Bush spent the overwhelming majority his presidency trying his darnedest to be serious and earnest. Circumstances, then, prevented him from being entertaining, except unintentionally. And the public eventually lost interest. And they told the pollsters as much.

A similar problem embroils our current president, who like Bush is not particularly entertaining and is therefore at risk of losing the public's interest. Truth be told, he's at risk of losing far more than that.

As with Bush, Obama's ability to be entertaining is limited in part by circumstances. He does after all, have several serious messes to distract him. More to the point, though, unlike Bush, Obama wouldn't be entertaining anyway. He's a scold, a lecturer, a prig. He's tiresome. He's a political ideologue and a wannabe policy wonk who actually thinks that

Americans are really interested in how he intends to transform the economy, save the bank, and establish "fairness" as a guiding principle for governance. Michael Wolff, the founder of *The Newser* and a columnist for *Vanity Fair* put it best:

You can see the fundamental mistake he's making. Having been so successfully elected, he's acting like people actually want to hear what he thinks. He's the great earnest bore at the dinner party. Instead of singing for his supper, he's just talking – and going on at length. The real job of making people part of the story you're telling, of having them hang on your every word, of getting the tone and detail right, the hard job of holding a conversation, he ain't doing.

He's cold; he's prickly; he's uncomfortable; he's not funny; and he's getting awfully tedious.

Back during the campaign, Barack took offense when the conservative media called him a "celebrity," giving the McCain camp fodder for some very funny campaign ads. But those ads were just funny, not effective. And what Obama and his handlers didn't appear to get was that the celebrity thing actually worked to their advantage. He was a superstar. And what more could American voters want in a candidate than superstardom? What? Do you think Californians elected and re-elected Arnold Schwarzenegger because they cared about his policy positions or admired the fact that he had always been a closeted Nixon fan? To ask the question is to answer it. Nixon? Really? The voters elected Arnold because he is a celebrity, a celebrity who is so famous that he doesn't really even need a last name. And they did the same – on a national level – with Barack.

Ironically, now in office, Obama appears to relish the idea of being a celebrity, as he must if he is to be successful. His problem is that he's just not very good at it.

In order to be a successful president in this day and age, one must be capable of two things. First, one must be able and willing to move with public as it

jumps from subject to subject, viewpoint to viewpoint, crisis to crisis, regardless of the idiocy of it all and without shame at the manifest contradictions one must embrace in doing so. This was Bush's great failure. He thought that a president should lead the public and focus on the tasks before him, rather than the inanities of public opinion. And so he did, much to his poll numbers' detriment.

The second thing a successful president must do is to be likeable and "watchable" as he bounces around, always keeping the public's focus on himself and always managing to be funny, clever – appealing. And it's here that Barack has no chance.

He appears to have made a conscious decision to try to keep pace with the public's limited attention span. But he's doing poorly, so very, very poorly. When he tries to sound outraged about the AIG bonus fiasco, his heart isn't in it, presumably because he feels some shame about the mess. He knows that his administration actually worked with Senator Chris Dodd to ensure that the stimulus legislation provided for the bonuses, and he can't quite reconcile reality with the image he wishes to present to the voters.

Worse than that though, the guy is awkward and soooooooooooooo unfunny. He presents this image of "cool": the all black outfit sitting courtside at the NBA games, the dry-erase NCAA Tournament bracket; playing basketball or swimming at the beach and being caught by photographers "accidentally" with his shirt off. But the image is manifestly phony. A guy who would feel it necessary to book an appearance on the Tonight Show and then get flustered, making a joke about the mentally challenged, is clearly trying too hard. With his teleprompter he's great. Without it, he is totally lost, a guy who has been trying all his life to fit in somewhere and never quite succeeding.

What's most bizarre about all of this is that despite his manifest unsuitability for such a presidency, Obama's advisors may actually be pushing him to be pursue "celebrity" as a governing style. Much was made about how Obama, the young, inexperienced radical, picked so many old Washington hands to advise him and to populate his White House. He's assembling such a smart, experienced group, the columnists and analysts gushed. What they never really took noticed,

though, was the fact that all of this "experience" came during the Clinton presidency, which is to say that these "brilliant" advisors have only one frame of reference when it comes to a successful president, old Bill himself. And if there is one thing that is clear just two months into the Obama presidency, it's that Barack is not Bill – and we don't mean that as a compliment.

For seventeen years now, ever since Bill Clinton emerged onto the national stage, we have been waiting to write something nice about the man. And so here goes.

Bill Clinton is everything Barack Obama appears to want to be but can't. He is clever. He is funny. He is magnetic. He is also shameless and completely and utterly unconcerned with contradictions or with consequences. He is, as the journalist Joe Klein noted in his book by the same name, "a natural."

Bill Clinton, you may recall, got caught having an affair with a lounge singer – *before he had even won his party's nomination*. He got caught diddling the interns, hiding subpoenaed records, lying under oath, and bombing an aspirin factory to distract the public from those lies. He quite likely solicited a state employee while Governor of Arkansas, and kept up the predations in the White House, most likely sexually harassing at least one former fund raiser. He sold nuclear secrets to the Chinese and sold access to the White House for campaign contributions. And he never looked back in regret.

And the public ate it up. They loved him. And still do.

When guys like Rahm Emanuel tell Obama to go on Leno and yuck it up, they're undoubtedly thinking that the appearance will go well and will help their guy "re-connect" with the public. But when they think about "their guy," they see Bill, not Barack. And they never stop to think that maybe Barack isn't up to it. It's one thing to have trusted, experienced advisors surrounding you. It's something else altogether to have Bill Clinton's advisors telling you to do what Bill would have done.

The Democrats and their supporters in the media mocked President Bush mercilessly for his horrible poll numbers and his lack of apparent public support. But Bush didn't seem much to care. After all, he won re-election; maintained the respect of the men and women in uniform; caused the world's tyrants to fear him, if not respect him; and kept the nation safe from further terrorist attacks.

At this point, we think Barack will be lucky to do any of those things. He appears, to us at least, to have chosen the worst of all strategies for a president. He's chasing public opinion, thus appearing feckless. But he's doing it hesitatingly and without the verve, the nerve, and the charm to pull it off. He is, as Michael Wolff noted, a "terrible bore." And worse yet, he could be a one-term, terrible bore. Wolff compares him, unfavorably, to Jimmy Carter. We're not so sure right now that we'd even give him that.

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