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THEY SAID IT

Of course, individuals as well as whole nations can be hypnotized into the belief that God or some world-process intends them to achieve this or that and to survive while others are going under, but there is always something pathetic, if not ludicrous, in beliefs of this kind. To the critical mind, neither a providential design nor a natural law of progressive development is discernible in the tragic human comedy of all times . . . To ask earnestly the question of the ultimate meaning of history takes one's breath away; it transports us into a vacuum which only hope and faith can fill.

Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 1949.

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PROGRESS IS OUR MOST IMPORTANT PRODUCT.

Are you confused by the actions of your government? Frightened by the probable consequences of these actions? Do you find that you can't watch the news on television or read the newspaper without becoming nauseated? Are you frightened by the amazing pace of on-going "change," along with the astounding promises emanating from Washington about myriad future changes? Do you yearn for quieter times?

If you answered yes to all of these questions, you should be relieved. It means you're normal. Of course, if you answered no, it is even better because you are apparently one of those special persons who is protected from such feelings of discomfort either because you are self centered and dumb as a sack full of hammers or because you are blessed with a strong sense of inner peace.

We number ourselves among the "normal." We are both confused and frightened. With little hope of achieving true inner peace, and fearing the consequences of abject stupidity, our intention is to learn to simply live a little more comfortably with the existing conditions, like one would if the proverbial "crazy aunt in the attic" had to move downstairs due to conditions beyond one's control.

Our approach to this project is to better understand the origins and the nature of the chaos in which we find ourselves, not with any hope of changing things, but to make it somewhat easier to anticipate the pitfalls that are natural to a society suffering from this disorder and to better plan for them. The idea is that it is less frightening and less dangerous to be in a hurricane if you at least know you are in a hurricane and understand the nature of hurricanes rather than being tossed around by some force of unknown origin. And in the

interests of the “brotherhood of man,” we thought we would share the results of our quest on the off chance that this might help you, gentle reader, to adjust to the times in which we live.

For starters, it is necessary to fully grasp the enormous importance of the fact that we Americans live in a culture that has become firmly and permanently dedicated to what is known as “The Whig Interpretation of History.” This term dates back to a 1931 book with that title by the British historian Herbert Butterfield. Simply stated, the Whig interpretation of history refers to the belief that the past can be viewed as an inexorable march of “progress.” The *Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought* defines it as follows:

The tendency of historians to see the past as the story of the conflict between progressives and reactionaries, in which the progressives, or Whigs, win and so bring about the modern world.

Butterfield himself put it this way:

What is discussed is the tendency in many historians to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present . . . The total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present – all demonstrating throughout the ages the workings of an obvious principle of progress.

Now the idea that mankind is engaged in a long march toward a progressively better world is relatively new. The ancient Greeks and the Romans recognized the importance of history, but they did not believe that history was being directed toward some ultimate transcendent purpose. St. Augustine outlined a similar attitude for Christians, arguing quite specifically that

what he called “profane history,” in which empires rise and fall, is meaningless, that the only historical journey that matters is the march to the eschaton, or the “end times,” when men would be united with God.

Hegel was the first modern philosopher to set forth the idea that mankind is slowly advancing toward a greater degree of reasonableness, freedom, and happiness. Karl Marx’s communism sprang from this Hegelian notion, as did all of its subsequent variations, including but not limited to socialism, fascism, and American liberalism. Oddly enough, Marx, who despised Christianity, formed the sale pitch for his new political ideology by secularizing the Christian concept of the eschaton. One need not wait for the hereafter to enjoy heaven on earth, he maintained, but could enjoy it in the here and now as a result of the communal efforts of men working through the state. He put it this way.

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic . . . The state or political order will wholly wither away, and homogeneous mankind will live socially under the rule of absolute benevolence—from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. No longer will duty be performed incidentally to the pursuit of selfish interest. The link between duty and interest, which is to say the subordination of duty to interest, will be broken for once and all by the abolition of the categories “duty” and “interest.” They will be abolished by the revision of the property relations, by the inauguration of a new economics

which will bring on the full perfection of human nature via the transcendence of production for exchange . . .

Today, the belief that the history of mankind describes a steady march from darkness to enlightenment and that we who are living today have an obligation to sustain this “progress” is a fundamental ingredient in American culture. Indeed, one could argue that it is resident in the mother’s milk of the nation. It dominates all political action and discussion. For example, liberals routinely use it as an argument in favor of demands for a seemingly endless array of new “rights” and new governmental activities, ranging from national health insurance to gay marriage to the elimination of global warming. President George W. Bush used it, when no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, to justify the war there as a first step in an attempt to bestow the benefits of freedom on all mankind, in accordance with his belief that “freedom is the destiny of every man, woman and child on this Earth.”

Now the point here is to understand and accept the fact that we Americans live in a society that is organically chaotic, that it can be no other way given that it is centered around, directed by, and entirely dependent upon the frenetic search for a magic formula to turn the scrappy little human animal species into a paragon of social harmony.

Needless to say, technology has enabled this frenzy to achieve increasingly new heights. Everyone is “tuned in” today. The 24 hour news cycle abjures the notion that nothing is happening right now. So intense is the demand for “news” that a giant public relations and entertainment industry has been formed to produce that which the historian Daniel J. Boorstin described as “pseudo events,” to fuel the frenzy.

This frenzy is the driving force behind the entire political process, from the election of the nation’s leaders, to the agendas that dictate policy, and to the implementation of these agendas. The nation’s new president is so taken with this process that he hubristically speaks of slowing the rise of the oceans,

healing the planet, ending war, and redistributing global wealth on a fairer basis.

In earlier times, people like that could be found either in what were then known as an “insane asylums,” or wandering the streets shouting incoherently at people. Today they make up the vast majority of the nation’s political leaders. One is reminded of Woody Allan’s famous line from “Hanna and Her Sisters:” “I am astounded by people who want to ‘know’ the universe when it’s hard enough to find your way around Chinatown.”

Three factors are integral to a society dedicated to the cause of “progress.” The first is an overwhelming will to power among the leadership. For what good is a God-like urge to make the world a better place without the power to bring it about? The second is a strong tendency to resort to the most extreme means to achieve one’s end, since this end is, by definition, of the highest and most noble nature. In such a society, for example, it would not be uncommon for its leaders, intoxicated by the nobility of their intentions, to abandon all pretense of fiscal prudence.

And finally, as Karl Löwith notes in the above quoted book, *Meaning in History*, the belief in immanent and indefinite progress inevitably replaces the belief in God’s transcendent providence. Löwith quotes the eminent Irish historian, classical scholar, and philologist John Bagnell Bury’s 1920 book, *The Idea of Progress*, as follows.

It was not till men felt independent of providence that they could organize a theory of progress, and vice versa: as long as the doctrine of providence was undisputed, a doctrine of progress could not arise. Eventually, however, the very doctrine of progress had to assume the function of providence, that is, to foresee and to provide for the future.

Now, as we said earlier, our purpose here is not to suggest remedies for this malady, or even to criticize it. It is what it is. Our purpose is to increase our understanding of the chaos it creates and to thus make

it somewhat easier to anticipate the pitfalls that are natural to a society suffering from this disorder and to better plan for them.

With this in mind, we would warn that there is no chance whatsoever that the chaos in which we live will be calmed by political action, for there is no figure of import in any leading political faction who even understands the problem much less advocates a cure. Indeed, the progressive tide has yet to reach the flood stage, which probably means that the chaos will end naturally, most likely in an explosion of some sort. To continue the tidal analogy, we will close with a warning from Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*.

The waters of religion are ebbing, and they are leaving behind swamps or ponds; the nations are again separating from one another in the most hostile manner, and they are trying to rip each other to shreds. The sciences, without any measure and pursued in the blindest spirit of *laissez faire*, are breaking apart and dissolving everything which is firmly believed; the edified classes and states are being swept along by a money economy, which is enormously contemptible. Never was the world more a world, never was it poorer in love and good. The educated classes are no longer lighthouses or sanctuaries in the midst of all this turbulent secularization; they themselves become more turbulent by the day, more thoughtless and loveless. Everything, contemporary art and science included, serves the coming barbarism.

THE LIBERAL DREAM WORLD, REDUX.

Regular readers know that there are a handful of writers and thinkers and a handful of their most relevant writings to which we here at The Political Forum return over and over again; men and women whose work is so profound and so astute that it has influenced not only our own thoughts and worldviews, but the worldviews of countless others, a great many conservatives included. They're our crutch, our touchstone, the breeding ground of ideas toward which we swim upstream time and again.

Regular readers will also recognize that one such thinker/writer is Eric Voegelin, the political philosopher whose best-known work, *The New Science of Politics*, is one of the most influential expositions on ideology and its consequences written in the 20th century and one of the staples of our own political commentaries and analyses.

Specifically, we have always made good use of Voegelin's conception of the liberal or the "Gnostic" dream world, a naïve and fantastical place in which intentions are all that matter and real-world consequences are of little concern or, at the very least, can be explained away as the result of destructive external influences. As Voegelin noted, the leaders of and subscribers to the dream world notions pledge themselves and their wards to all "types of action which in the real world would be considered as morally insane, because of the real effects which they have, [but which] will be considered moral in the dream world, because they intended an entirely different effect." He continued, arguing that 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.

Why do we bring this up again now? What compels us once again to dredge up Voegelin and the liberal dream world?

Need you ask?

Once again, it seems, the government of the United States is under the control of those whose principal objective appears to be to “do good” – not that there’s anything wrong with that. The problem, of course, is with the presumption, that trying to do good is enough, and that making the attempt is what really counts, regardless of the ultimate outcome.

Let us take, for example, President Obama’s latest global initiative, that whereby he intends to rid the world of nuclear weapons, not through conquest and capture of those weapons, mind you, but through “diplomacy” and international treaties. This sounds admirable enough, we guess. After all, no one really *likes* nukes.

But is this objective even theoretically possible? Does anyone anywhere actually believe that the Russians and the Chinese, much less the Norks and the Mullahs, are going to go along with Obama and beat their warheads into plowshares?

Moreover, does anyone really think that the types of inducements that will be necessary to get any of the relevant parties even to feign interest are reasonable, much less practical? President Obama has had, among other things, to purchase the appearance of Russian interest in the project by promising, once again, to shelve the United States’ on-again-off-again plans to develop and deploy a missile defense system. But that’s a small price to pay for a nuke-free world, right? Who’s gonna need a missile shield when there are no missiles? So good for Obama, right?

Well . . . except for the minor detail that seems to have been overlooked, namely that there are those who don’t seem to want to play along and who, it turns out, are in the process of perfecting both their nuclear capabilities and their ability to deliver nuclear weapons intercontinentally.

So what we have here is the President of the United States pledging to abandon missile defense in pursuit of the purportedly admirable goal of ridding the world of nuclear weapons. In the process, though, he threatens to expose allies, American troops, and even the Western coast of North America to the predations of a madman who is completely impervious to “international pressure,” whatever that means. Outside of the dream world, is there anyone who would not consider that “morally insane,” to borrow again from Voegelin?

The entire North Korean episode is, we think, demonstrative and, to be perfectly honest, dispiriting. Voegelin notes that in the dream world, leaders will address real threats with the promise of “magic operations . . . 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.”

Now, just for the sake of comparison, here’s what President Obama said in response to the latest nuclear test in North Korea:

Today, North Korea said that it has conducted a nuclear test in violation of international law . . .

These actions, while not a surprise given its statements and actions to date, are a matter of grave concern to all nations . . .

By acting in blatant defiance of the United Nations Security Council, North Korea is directly and recklessly challenging the international community . . .

The danger posed by North Korea’s threatening activities warrants action by the international community. We have been and will continue working with our

allies and partners in the Six-Party Talks as well as other members of the U.N. Security Council in the days ahead.

Voegelin couldn't have scripted it better himself.

In the dream world, the consequences of utopian foolishness are never understood, never contemplated, never even discussed. Yet their effect on the real world is undeniable.

Let's stay, for a moment, with the example of North Korea. As we have written countless times before, and as others have written in the several days since the Norks re-emerged onto the global stage, threatening nuclear holocaust, the problem of Kim Jong Il and his nukes is really not an American problem. It is, first and foremost a Chinese problem. The North Korean regime would be unable to sustain itself without Chinese support, which is also to say that a little Chinese pressure could bring Kim and his cronies to heel rather quickly. So why don't they? Because they don't want to, and, more to the point, because the United States can't make them.

In a normal world, where nuclear weapons weren't "off the table," just the threat of amending the Japanese constitution to permit that nation to defend itself against regional hostility with a nominal rearmament – including nuclear weapons – would compel the Chinese to handle Kim. But nukes are off the table, remember, the President having declared them to be unsafe in anyone's hands.

Not that anyone in Washington dares even contemplate the idea of Japanese rearmament. That would, obviously, be considered provocative by the Chinese, and, as any schoolboy knows, provoking the Chinese is the last thing the United States can afford to do right now.

It's funny. While President Obama was here in Washington bleating on about the Norks and their threat to global peace, his Treasury secretary was in Beijing, pleading with the only regime in the world capable of peacefully ending the North Korean

threat not to cut his boss off in the midst of his spending spree. Talk about actions "intended [to] have and entirely different effect." It's just one more component of the degeneration into a world of fantasy. President Obama pledged growth, stimulus, jobs, and massive increases in domestic spending. And what he delivered instead was the inability to use even the simplest and mildest leverage in the service of stopping a madman from pursuing nuclear Armageddon. Pressure the Chinese to crack down on the North Koreans? Are you kidding? How's a junkie to pressure his dealer, exactly?

President Obama sees himself as a transformative president, a man elected to alter the course of the country, to restore hope and bring real change. And that, of course, is the very definition of a Gnostic. The promised transformation, though, requires cash – and lots of it. And the Chinese are hardly the only ones benefiting from "different effects" of President Obama's dream world extravagance.

Last month, for example, was the biggest month for crude oil in ten years. As Bloomberg noted, "Oil advanced 30 percent in May, the biggest monthly increase since March 1999, when Asia was recovering from the 1997-1998 financial crisis. Prices climbed 7.5 percent this week and 49 percent this year." Why, you ask? Because the dollar tanked last month. And why did the dollar tank? Because of fears (reasonable fears, we might add) that runaway American spending (promised and delivered by old Hopeychangey himself) will lead, eventually, to runaway inflation. So the Saudis, the Iranians, the Russians, the Venezuelans, and the rest had a pretty good month in May, the best in ten years. We don't recall, was that the intended effect of the stimulus?

And the list goes on and on . . .

In the dream world, savaging the secured creditors of bankrupt automakers is a good and righteous act, one designed to preserve the well being of the working man and reprove the "speculators" who would profit unfairly and at the expense of "real" Americans.

In the real world, the savaging of secured creditors is morally absurd, leading inevitably to hesitation on the part of erstwhile secured creditors to get involved with unionized companies, for fear that the government will, yet again, change the rules after the fact in another misguided attempt to protect workers (or to payoff a valuable constituency, depending on one's level of cynicism).

In the dream world, prostrating oneself before the Mad Mullahs of Iran is a noble and gracious gesture intended to demonstrate equanimity and politesse, an act of decency and "diplomacy," a move away from the bellicosity of a previous age.

In the real world, American submission to Iran makes the possibility of war – and nuclear war at that – far more likely. The Israelis, who both know and care that the Iranians continue to pursue their own atomic weapons; who both know and care that the North Korean-built nuclear plant that they destroyed in Syria just under two years ago was *paid for* by the Mullahs; and who both know and care that the Iranians are co-conspirators with the North Koreans in that country's

nuclear weapons program, are now more likely to believe that they must defend themselves, given that no one else appears ready or willing to defend them.

Et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum.

It is often said that one of the principal drawbacks of modern American liberalism is its vulnerability to the law of unintended consequences, that its good intentions are ultimately rendered immaterial by the unforeseen costs of implementing those intentions. True though that may, it's irrelevant in this case, since the consequences in all of the above cases were anything but "unforeseen." They, in truth, were readily foreseen and often predicted.

But they were also ignored. And today, tomorrow, and the next day, when they can no longer be ignored, they will be dismissed, the machinations of malevolent intruders desperate to score political points.

Such is life in the Liberal Dream world.

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