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## THEY SAID IT

All of us must now renew the common stake that we have in one another. I know that promises of partnership have gone unfulfilled in the past, and that trust has to be earned over time. While the United States has done much to promote peace and prosperity in the hemisphere, we have at times been disengaged, and at times we sought to dictate our terms. But I pledge to you that we seek an equal partnership. There is no senior partner and junior partner in our relations; there is simply engagement based on mutual respect and common interests and shared values. So I'm here to launch a new chapter of engagement that will be sustained throughout my administration.

The United States will be willing to acknowledge past errors where those errors have been made.

President Barack Obama, address to the Summit of the Americas opening ceremony, April 17, 2009.

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## WEIGHED ON THE SCALES AND FOUND WANTING.

Don't look now, but President Obama is "concerned" again. Deeply concerned, in fact. Not even a week after finally having to confess to the world that he might, at least in theory, be "appalled and outraged" with the Mullahs of Iran for the wanton slaughter of their own people, President Obama has been backed into a corner again, this time by the Honduran military, which apparently caused a bit of a stink over the weekend.

As media outlets reported, the President of Honduras was "arrested" by the nation's armed forces and then deported *post haste* to Costa Rica. And President Obama, apparently chastened by the criticism of his handling of the Iranian election mess, sprang immediately to action, grabbing the boiler plate and the first available microphone to make his point. *The Wall Street Journal* put it this way:

Reaction to the apparent coup was swift. U.S. President Barack Obama said he was "deeply concerned" and called on all political actors in Honduras to "respect democratic norms, the rule of law and the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Any existing tensions and disputes must be resolved peacefully through dialogue free from any outside interference," he said.

The Obama administration worked in recent days to prevent President Zelaya's ouster, a senior U.S. official said. The State Department, in particular, communicated to Honduran officials on the ground that President Obama wouldn't support any non-democratic transfer of power in the Central American country.

“We had some indication” that a move against Mr. Zelaya was afoot, said a U.S. official briefed on the diplomacy. “We made it clear it was something we didn’t support.”

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton joined Mr. Obama Sunday in criticizing the Honduran coup and calling for the restoration of the democratic process.

“We call on all parties in Honduras to respect the constitutional order and the rule of law, to reaffirm their democratic vocation, and to commit themselves to resolve political disputes peacefully and through dialogue,” Mrs. Clinton said in a statement.

While our instincts are to congratulate the President on his improved reaction time, there are a couple of problems that make applauding the Obama team a little problematic. First, of course, is the fact that this coup wasn’t actually a coup. You see, to make a long story short, Manuel Zelaya wanted another term as President, but his wishes violated the constitution. Nevertheless, he scheduled a referendum on the matter, and intended to carry out the vote, despite the fact that it had been officially ruled illegal.

When it became clear that Zelaya wouldn’t comply with the constitution or with the court rulings against him, the nation’s Supreme Court ordered his arrest, in compliance with a court order and, more to the point, *in support of the rule of law*. All of which is to say that not only was this not a coup, but, conveniently enough, President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, and the rest of the Gang That Couldn’t Shoot Straight managed to put themselves and the United States on the wrong side of this one, siding with the extra-constitutional thugs, trashing democracy, and breaching the rule of law.

Super.

Moreover, while Obama et al. were expressing their concern, their displeasure, their dyspepsia, and whatever else they might have been feeling, Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez was threatening war and promising to send troops to Honduras to restore the deposed Zelaya and ensure that the Honduran constitution would be subverted. Not that Obama could or would do much about it, having already pledged himself to the same end as Chavez. But that’s one more complicating factor the Hondurans didn’t exactly need.

Did we say super, yet?

Now, truth be told, we’re exaggerating a bit, for effect. We’re not really surprised that Obama and pals are on the wrong side of this one. After all, the Honduran military has longstanding ties to the United States and, more to the point, to the Nicaraguan Contras, the onetime all-purpose bogeyman for lefties everywhere. Moreover, Obama’s self-proclaimed “amigo” Chavez is standing in brave opposition to the Honduran army (and Congress, and courts, and constitution, etc.), and so are the Castro brothers, Raul and Bernie (from “Weekend at Bernie’s” fame). So how could Obama possibly get on the other side of this?

What really concerns us is that Obama’s reaction to this is utterly irrelevant. Outside of a few political junkies, does anyone really give a tinker’s damn what Obama thinks about Honduras? Do you think the Hondurans do? Or Chavez? Or the Castros? We doubt it. Why would they?

Last fall, when then-Senator Joe Biden warned that Obama would be “tested” in the first few months of his presidency, we scoffed. Not that we didn’t think that there would be those who sought to take advantage of Obama’s real or perceived weakness, but we didn’t believe any “testing” was necessary. The world’s “bad actors” has already taken their measure of the man. He had, to paraphrase the prophet Daniel, already been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

The first few months of this administration have done precious little to convince anyone that we were mistaken. Test a missile? Well, that's concerning. Offer aid and comfort to America's enemies? *Deeply* concerning. Provide safe haven for said enemies to train and plot against American interests? Really, super deeply concerning. Subvert the electoral process, suppress dissent, slaughter your own people? Well, that's downright disquieting.

Last month, when North Korea conducted another nuclear weapons test, in violation of international agreements and in spite of warnings from Washington, President Obama's reaction was, perhaps, best summed up by the writer Andy Borowitz.

Unfortunately, Borowitz is a satirist, though you might have to read the following at least a couple of times to determine that for certain:

One day after North Korea launched a successful test of a nuclear weapon, President Obama said that the United States was prepared to respond to the threat with "the strongest possible adjectives."

In remarks to reporters at the White House, Mr. Obama said that North Korea should fear the "full force and might of the United States' arsenal of adjectives" and called the missile test "reckless, reprehensible, objectionable, senseless, egregious and condemnable."

Standing at the President's side, Vice President Joseph Biden weighed in with some tough adjectives of his own, branding North Korean President Kim Jong-Il "totally wack and illin'."

Later in the day, Defense Secretary Robert Gates called the North Korean nuclear test "supercilious and jejune," leading some in diplomatic circles to

worry that the U.S. might be running out of appropriate adjectives with which to craft its response.

But President Obama attempted to calm those fears, saying that the United States was prepared to "scour the thesaurus" to come up with additional adjectives and was "prepared to use adverbs" if necessary.

"Let's be clear: we are not taking adverbs off the table," Mr. Obama said. "If the need arises, we will use them forcefully, aggressively, swiftly, overwhelmingly and commandingly."

What we have then, is a world in which: the Pakistanis are alternately trying to sue for peace with or wage all out war against the Taliban; the North Koreans have tested long-range missiles and nuclear weapons and are purportedly moving versions of both into the Pacific in preparation for a launch in the direction of Hawaii; the Mad Mullahs in Iran have withstood the early protest-slaughter stage of the counterrevolution and have moved on to the daytime calm-nighttime disappearances stage; and in which Honduras is in the middle of a constitutional crisis and is being threatened with war by the region's strongman, leftist thug, and narco-terrorist sponsor.

And all of this Obama's fault, right?

Well . . . not really. Much as we would like to, we can't blame everything bad that happens on Obama. Unlike the Bush haters, who spent all of the last eight years screaming "Bush did it," at every possible occasion, we want to avoid reflexively bashing the President or assigning to him power to affect incidents that he simply does not possess.

That said, it is clear that all of these actions have been undertaken without even the slightest concern for what Obama might think about them. Sure, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may pay lip service to the idea that Obama's opinion and his words means something

to him and the people of Iran, but anyone paying even the slightest bit of attention can see that that's simply not true. He doesn't care what Obama thinks any more than Ayatollah Khamenei does. And Khamenei doesn't care any more than Kim Jong Il does, or Hugo Chavez does. None of these guys – none of these “global bad actors” – gives even a passing thought to Obama or what he might think. And again we ask, why would they?

For years now, the Europeans and their fellow travelers on the American left have begged inexorably for the United States to take a reduced and more “humble” role in global affairs. And Barack Obama has been more than willing to oblige. Throughout his presidency, he has traveled the globe, apologizing for the sins of his predecessors and promising that the United States will no longer “impose” its will on others or “dictate” its terms to the rest of the world. He has given America's critics what they claimed to have wanted.

And they can see for themselves the results.

This spring, in a piece about Obama's penchant for apologizing for his country, *The Jerusalem Post's* Caroline Glick noted the following:

Whether they are aggressors like Russia, proliferators like North Korea, terror exporters like nuclear-armed Pakistan or would-be genocidal-terror-supporting nuclear states like Iran, today, under the new administration, none of them has any reason to fear Washington.

This is what it means for America to be more “humble.” This is what it means for the United States to take on a diminished role and to consider itself chastened for its past transgressions. This is the post-American world. It is Obama's world.

Two months ago, we warned that the nations of the world already understood that Obama had inaugurated a post-American foreign policy and that they had, as a result, begun to make plans for this

new world, considering American quiescence. Does anyone doubt, even for a second, that some of this planning was on display in Latin America this past weekend? Illegal referenda; military takeovers; charges of kidnapping; requests for asylum; and threats of immediate and bloody war – all in the United States' backyard. And no one – on either side, right or wrong, good or bad – wastes even a minute worrying how or when the American president will respond.

President Obama is, in a word, weak. But then he promised that he would be. And we, as an electorate, have no one to blame but ourselves.

Fortunately for us, most of the pain of this weakness will be felt by others: by the Hondurans caught up in a potential civil war or even a regional war; by Pakistani people torn between government and Taliban mobs; by Neda Solton as she lies in the streets of Tehran, bleeding to death from a sniper's bullet.

The world is unstable. It always has been and always will be. That's one of the ongoing and ineluctable results of the old story about the man, the woman, the garden, and the snake.

Over the last three decades, the world was made a little less unstable by the global leadership of the United States, as directed by both Republicans (Reagan, Bush, and Bush) and Democrats (Clinton). But that's all over now, just as promised.

If we were betting men, we'd bet on even greater volatility in foreign affairs over the next few months. Presidential chief of staff Rahm Emanuel is a smart cookie, a man who advised his president not to let a good crisis go to waste. But Rahm is not the only one who knows this. And the others in other countries are equally unlikely to let this crisis – or President Obama's distraction and feebleness – go unexploited.

## THE FUTURE IS NOW.

A long time ago – it seems like a lifetime now – we were walking across the pool area of a beautiful resort somewhere in the Southeast – Orlando, Kiawa, the Plantation, who knows – with Newt Gingrich, who was about to give a dinner speech to a Prudential gathering that our office was sponsoring. He asked us to tell him a little about the people whom he was about to address and asked what subjects would be most interesting to them. We told him that his audience would be interested in anything and everything he had to say, that he could talk about the economy, geopolitics, inside Washington, American history, the latest papal encyclical, or the weather and he would still have their full attention. He looked skeptical.

So we explained that good money managers are always seeking some piece of information or insight that will give them an edge, whether slight or large, over their competitors; that the best among them were interested in all aspects of life in these United States and across the globe, up to and including idle talk at cocktail parties about condo prices, what kind of cars people are buying, a good fast food joint, vacation plans, or the price and quality of their kids' education.

We here at The Political Forum still try to write for the folks that we described to Newt that day, people who are fascinated by all the whys and wherefores of the strange world in which we all live and invest today. As we have said before in these pages, we like to think of these people as 21st century America's version of Plato's, Isaiah's, and Matthew Arnold's "remnant," the word all three of these scholars used to portray a small, but select, group of people on whose shoulders, each believed, rested the hope for a better society.

Plato's remnant was made up of men whom he described as "worthy disciples of philosophy," who had "seen enough of the madness of the multitude . . . who will not join in the wickedness of his fellows." Isaiah's remnant was a contingent of devout Israelites who, God assured the prophet, would survive the destruction of their nation at the hands of Assyria.

Arnold's remnant consisted of the "intelligent minority" who he hoped would save the United States from "the unsound majority."

So, with this in mind, we are going to take a very different approach in this piece to the on-going debate over the extraordinary centralization of power that has occurred within the United States during the past half century and that is accelerating at warp speed today under the direction of Barack Obama.

We are going to ignore, for the time being, the blow-by-blow accounts of the various battles in this historic confrontation that so amuse and occupy the media today and focus instead on the origins of this centuries long fight between the tendency of power to concentrate in the hands of a few and the determined efforts of some individuals to oppose this concentration.

The centerpiece of our effort to provide some historic and philosophical background on this fight is a 1948 book entitled *On Power* by the French philosopher and political economist Bertrand de Jouvenel, whose excellent book *The Ethics of Redistribution* has been discussed numerous times in these pages. We plan to let de Jouvenel speak for himself on this subject. So here goes.

From the twelfth to the eighteenth century governmental authority grew continuously. The process was understood by all who saw it happening; it stirred them to incessant protest and violent reaction. In later times its growth has continued at an accelerated pace . . . And now we no longer understand the process, we no longer protest, we no longer react. This quiescence of ours is a new thing, for which Power has to thank the smoke-screen in which it has wrapped itself . . .

We are the witnesses of a fundamental transformation of society, of a crowning expansion of Power. The revolutions

and *coups d'état* which are a feature of our epoch are but insignificant episodes heralding the coming of the social protectorate. A beneficent authority will watch over everyman from the cradle to the grave, repairing the disasters which befall him, even when they are of his own making, controlling his personal development and orientating him towards the most appropriate use of his faculties. By a necessary corollary, this authority will be the disposer of society's entire resources, with a view to getting from them the highest possible return and in that way multiplying the benefits which it confers.

Power takes over, as it were, the whole business of public and private happiness, and it is an indispensable clause of the contract that all possessions, all productive energies, and all liberties should be handed over to it, as being the labour and the raw materials without which it cannot accomplish so gigantic a task. The business is one of setting up an immense patriarchy, or, if anyone prefers the word, a matriarchy, since we are now told that collective authority should be animated by maternal instincts.

It is, no doubt, true that not every mind has a clear conception of the goal to which the pressure behind the idea of a social protectorate is driving. But it is obvious enough to the thoughtful. There are those who denounce it in panic, but with no clear perception of the force and complexity of the causes at work. There are those who welcome it, but with no care for all the ensuing consequences. In truth the atmosphere of the whole debate is less that of two doctors calmly discussing a course of treatment than that of two swimmers swept away by a current, against

which one struggles while the other deliberately abandons himself to it: it is an atmosphere not of reason but of emotion . . .

It goes without saying that, thanks to the ingrained habit of legality, the interventions on which Power now embarks take on at first the form of laws. But these are but counterfeit laws, concerned only to provide for the situations of the moment, owning the imperious sway of current passions and requirements. Under the cloak of objective legislation, every subjective desire enjoys a saturnalia, as is shown both by the rapidity and the inconsistency with which these so-called laws multiply. Principle and certitude are things of the past; the desires of the moment become 'your only lawgiver,' no respecters these of the notions of moral good and natural necessity, which they confound with that of utility in its most transitory shape. Utility itself has come to mean not the permanent utility of society as a whole, but the passing utility of a section group which accommodates virtue and knowledge to its interests and passions.

Whatever pretensions are made that this is the way to be of service to man, the fact remains that he thereby loses all liberty and all dignity. For he can now no longer plan his course by reference to any given certainties, and the knowledge that any activity of his own will avail him much less than to stand well with Power disposes him towards ambition of a servile kind – to be of those who are in touch with the author of all miracles, to be a beneficiary of arbitrariness . . .

[In this type of society] the very men whose duty it is to secure order spread disorder. The troubling of the concepts

of right conduct spreads from top to bottom, and individuals, whatever their stations and functions, lose the precise and detailed picture of their duties on which their effectiveness as fellow-workers depends.

When that happens, cohesion can be restored to society only by Power's formulating in the greatest detail the rules of behavior which are appropriate to each separate function. And since habits and folkways, those powerful internal regulators of the concepts of right conduct, have ceased to bring about a spontaneous conformity, conformity must be secured by repression.

But repression cannot be made effective at every turn and everywhere; that would need as many policemen as there are citizens. Therefore it is sought to supply the defect of external compulsion by a form of constraint which is really the most efficacious of all, that which the forum of a man's own conscience exercises over his actions. Concepts of right conduct are put into him from without, for which purpose use must be made of the squalid weapons of mass suggestion and propaganda. The upshot is squalid concepts, undifferentiated by reference to function, as those which spring from moral influences and observed examples are differentiated.

The social cohesion created in this way is of a far rougher and more primitive kind than the one which has been allowed to perish. The divergences which troubled society are diminished, but at the price of the differences which gave it its civilization. This is the totalitarian solution . . . The arbitrary Power, swept on by the passions of the mob and swayed by the ardours of the holders of office, lacking rule and bit

and limit, constitutes, for all its tinsel dresses, a despotism such as the West has never known before. It is none the less dangerous for being unstable—all despotisms have been unstable. As none is outside its power, it makes for servility; as every conquest is open to it, it breeds ambition. And, lastly, the demand for order, with which we began, ends in letting loose disorder on a gigantic scale . . .

Power, which had been refashioned [during the 19<sup>th</sup> century] for the service of society, is in reality its master [today]. It is the less contested for claiming itself to be society's offspring. It is the more irresistible for meeting with no authority outside itself with the strength to limit it . . . [The process by which this has occurred in the material sphere] was accompanied by a similar process in the spiritual. Instead of being subjected, as in the past, to the categorical imperatives of creed and conduct, men rid themselves of these superstitions and took to sitting in their own judgment seat as to what they should believe and in what manner they should act . . . [This] dethronement of the old faith, to which the state itself was subject, left an aching void in the room of beliefs and principles, a void which enabled Power to enunciate and impose its own. The appeal to the state against the exploiters of human labour ended in the substitution of it for them. The result is our present tendency toward the concentration in the same hand of a unified political command and a unified economic command, toward, in other words, an absolute *imperium* such as we never imagined by our forefathers, to find the like of which we must turn to other civilizations, such the Ancient Egyptians . . .

At the summit of our society are regents who, that action may be harmonized, have an eye to the harmonization of thought. At the base is a mob which is, taken all in all, obedient, credulous, and laborious, which dutifully receives from the sovereign its orders, its faith and its daily bread, and which lives more or less in a state of servitude to a master who is immeasurably distant and impersonal.

The proposition that this state of public servitude is the inevitable culminating point of the historical sequence formed by the successive stages of a civilization, can be supported with many more proofs than are available to demonstrate the interpretation of a progress towards liberty. But it would be exceeding our knowledge to assume that the sequence has a culminating point. As to that we know nothing, and we are acquainted with too few civilizations in the successive stages of their development to justify us in making their histories the norm of our own.

We do no more than record that every society which has evolved in the direction of a state of individual liberty turns aside from that liberty suddenly and abruptly just when it seems on the point of attaining it . . .

In closing, let us say that our intention here is not to provide a fatalistic basis for believing that Barack's campaign to collectivize all power in Washington is unstoppable. We simply want to call attention to the enormous momentum that history has provided to the movement he leads and to warn those that are opposing it that the danger of losing the fight is high and that victory will require courage, fortitude, sacrifice, wisdom, and a powerful sense of purpose that appears, at the present, to be sadly lacking, especially among the supposed leadership of the opposition.

In the end, of course, Barack's project will fail, for it is deeply flawed, both practically and spiritually. But that is of little comfort to those whose freedom and lives will be compromised and even destroyed along the way. Freedom needs a leader. We can only pray that one will emerge out of the chaos that lies ahead.

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