

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

In this Issue

First They Came for the Smokers;
Then They Came for the Fatties.

Amateur Hour.

THEY SAID IT

The kinship of pity to love is shown among other ways in this, that it idealizes its object. Sympathy with one in suffering suppresses, for the time being, remembrance of his transgressions. The feeling which vents itself in "poor fellow!" on seeing one in agony, excludes the thought of "bad fellow," which might at another time arise. Naturally, then, if the wretched are unknown or but vaguely known, all the demerits they may have are ignored; and thus it happens that when the miseries of the poor are dilated upon, they are thought of as the miseries of the deserving poor, instead of being thought of as the miseries of the undeserving poor, which in large measure they should be. Those whose hardships are set forth in pamphlets and proclaimed in sermons and speeches which echo thorough society, are assumed to be all worthy souls, grievously wronged; and none of them are thought of as bearing the penalties of their misdeeds.

Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus The State*, 1884.

FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE SMOKERS; THEN THEY CAME FOR THE FATTIES.

Ideologies, like cults, vary widely in type and appeal depending upon the culture and the times. Communism was never the big hit in Europe that it was in Russia and China, and socialism never made the big time in the United States as it did in Europe. Americans instead bought into what is commonly called liberalism.

They did this on a grand scale in the 1930s and the 1940s because it promised solutions to the economic problems created by the Great Depression and encompassed a range of collectivist measures that Roosevelt convincingly claimed were necessary to win World War II. Moreover, liberalism, as contrasted to Communism and European socialism, seemed to be not just compatible with America's Judeo-Christian traditions, but a manifestation of the best aspects of it. Indeed, its oft-stated mission was thought to be noble, i.e., to use the great power of the government to assure that all citizens were able to realize the "American dream." Moreover, the early pioneers of liberalism gave no ground to conservatives when it came to publicly proclaiming their faith in God.

For example, shortly after winning the presidency, one of liberalism's great heroes, Woodrow Wilson, informed William McCombs, the Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, that he owed neither him nor the party anything for his victory. "God ordained that I should be the next President of the United States. Neither you nor any other mortal could have prevented that," he stated. Another liberal icon, Franklin Roosevelt, routinely invoked God's name and will. In a radio address in May 1941, he sought to "reassert

our abiding faith in the vitality of our constitutional Republic as a perpetual home of freedom, of tolerance, and of devotion to the word of God.”

Several years later, in an announcement to the American people that the D-Day invasion had begun, he said the following: “Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor . . . They will need Thy blessings . . . we know that by Thy grace, and by the righteousness of our cause, our sons will triumph . . . Thy will be done, Almighty God.”

This mixing of religiosity with liberal politics accomplished what the anarchists and syndicalists and even the early utopian socialists could not. It made big government collectivism not just acceptable but welcome to millions of Americans, and before long religious leaders all over the United States, including a large percentage of the Catholic clergy, began integrating left wing dogma into their sermons and homilies. Compassion was, and still is, the key word in this unnatural nexus. Liberalism is “compassionate.” Compassion is a fundamental tenet of Christianity. Ergo liberalism is the ideal political scheme for Christians and Jews.

All and all, it was a brilliant display of the “social myth” technique described by Georges Sorel as the creation of “an idea not valid, but necessary to set the masses in motion.” Indeed, it has been so successful over the past fifty-plus years that some of the nation’s leading Republicans have routinely felt it necessary to bear public witness to their capacity for compassion, beginning with President Eisenhower’s declaration in his first term that “I am conservative when it comes to economic problems but liberal when it comes to human problems.” Not to be outdone, his successor Richard Nixon announced that all Republican candidates for the presidency “should be economic conservatives, but conservatives with a heart.”

Barry Goldwater was one of the few post-World War II conservative politicians to recognize that Eisenhower’s and Nixon’s nod to liberal compassion was nonsense. He declared that “these formulations are tantamount to an admission that Conservatism

is a narrow, mechanistic economic theory that may work very well as a bookkeeper’s guide, but cannot be relied upon as a comprehensive political philosophy.” Such statements, he said, do great injustice to the Conservative point of view. “Conservatism is not an economic theory,” he explained, “though it has economic implications. The shoe is precisely on the other foot: it is Socialism that subordinates all other considerations to man’s material well-being. It is Conservatism that puts material things in their proper place—that has a structured view of the human being and of human society, in which economics plays only a subsidiary role.”

Needless to say, Goldwater’s charges were on solid intellectual ground. Indeed, Tocqueville had said just about everything that ever needed to be said on the subject over a century earlier in this book *Memoir on Pauperism*, written in 1835 during his first trip to Great Britain.

Where public charity is the law, Tocqueville said, “the number of illegitimate children and criminals grows rapidly and continuously . . .” The reason indigent women continue to have illegitimate offspring, he added, is that under the system of public charity, “illegitimate pregnancy must almost always improve their material condition . . .” He then noted that the English system was also deleterious because it destroyed “the spirit of foresight” and made the idea of saving “more and more alien to the poor.”

When public charity becomes a “right,” Tocqueville continued, it loses its stigma. People no longer suffer embarrassment at their inability to support themselves or their children. Of one welfare claimant whose public plea he actually witnessed, Tocqueville wrote, “he does not blush to claim public charity, which has lost all of its afflicting and humiliating character in the people’s eyes.” This, Tocqueville claimed, is detrimental because it reduces the incentives to find work and leaves the system open to rampant abuse. If there is no shame associated with seeking assistance, then all, including those not truly needy, will seek aid and will lack sufficient motivation to remove themselves from the public dole.

Tocqueville further noted that private charity, the system replaced by the Poor Law, “established valuable ties between the rich and the poor. The deed itself involves the giver in the fate of the one whose poverty he has chosen to alleviate. The latter . . . feels inspired by gratitude . . .” In contrast, he said, public charity “strips the man of wealth of a part of his surplus without consulting him, and he sees the poor man only as a greedy stranger invited by the legislator to share his wealth. The poor man, on the other hand, feels no gratitude for a benefit that no one can refuse him and that could not satisfy him in any case.” Public charity, he said, “breaks the only link which could be established between them [rich and poor]. It ranges each one under a banner, tallies them, and, bringing them face to face, prepares them for combat.” In short, he concluded, “it inflames society’s sores.”

Needless to say, liberals won the fight in the good old U.S. of A., so decisively, in fact, that George W. Bush raised the ante on Eisenhower and Nixon and actually made “compassionate conservatism” a centerpiece of his first run for presidency. Moreover, he proved his allegiance to the creed by pushing for and then signing a new Medicare prescription drug benefit which was described at the time as the “largest expansion of entitlements since the Johnson administration,” possibly adding as much as \$2 trillion to federal outlays over the next twenty years.

Over the years, many theories have been put forth, books and articles written, and speeches given on the subject of the popularity of government sponsored compassion. But the simplest and best explanation, in our opinion, is that it provides its proponents with the means of assuming a public air of virtue and religiosity without have to go to the trouble of actually being either virtuous or religious. Our old friend and intellectual mentor Dr. Claes Ryn explained it this way in his classic 1991 book *The New Jacobinism, Can Democracy Survive?*

Christian ideas of community and virtue . . . are akin to earlier Greek ideas, especially those of Aristotle. The individual’s primary moral responsibility is to make the best of self and to love neighbor. This is a demanding

notion of virtue, for nothing is more difficult than overcoming one’s own selfishness and behaving charitably toward people of flesh and blood at close range. People with names and faces have a way of presenting us with concrete and immediate obligations. Sometimes they make highly uncomfortable demands on our time and energy. To make charitable behavior even more difficult, they may be our competitors, perhaps also difficult and unlikable. Moral responsibility is achieved only slowly and with effort. It is in daily life, primarily in one’s own intimate associations, that opportunities for love of neighbor are actually present. Man’s moral character is shaped and tested first and foremost in relationships that are up close and personal.

Virtue manifested as love of neighbor may be contrasted with what is perhaps the most common modern idea of virtue. The latter lets individuals claim moral worth who show no particular signs of moral character in their actual conduct and who may, by traditional moral standards, actually be personally odious and very hard for people to live or work with. Their virtue is that they entertain benevolent sentiments for various abstract entities, such as “the people,” “mankind,” “the proletariat,” “the poor,” “the downtrodden,” “the starving third world,” or the like—categories that are all comfortably distant from the emoting person and which therefore impose no concrete and personally demanding obligations on the individual. Still, this sentimental posture of caring contains a pleasant ingredient of self-applause. It is, as it were, morality made easy. It presupposes no difficult improvement of self in actual human relationships.

But guess what? The free ride to virtue is coming to an end. In the very near future, liberals and “compassionate conservatives” alike are going to have to pay up for the privilege of compassion by proxy. Or give it up. And therein lies the most fascinating political story of the 21st century.

Why is this, you ask? Well, because contrary to popular belief, redistribution of wealth from “the rich” to “the poor” has not been the principal means of financing the compassionate, liberal state for the past 50-plus years. If a pay-as-you-go system such as this had been used, there would be little or no problem with it today. But it wasn’t.

Instead, the compassionate, liberal state has been financed almost entirely by the accumulation of massive amounts of government debt and by the two largest Ponzi schemes that the world has ever seen, i.e., Social Security and Medicare. And lo, these funding sources are drying up, which means that in the very near future, proponents of continued government largess at the current rate will have to pay for their virtuous inclinations by a combination of higher taxes and cuts in their own access to government handouts.

Time will tell how liberals will react when they have skin in the game, but early signs indicate that some are already beginning to question the wisdom of liberalism’s legendary generosity; indeed some just might, as Herbert Spencer suggested just over a century ago, finally be open to distinguishing between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor, and between the “worthy souls, grievously wronged” and those who are simply “bearing the penalties of their misdeeds.”

For example, liberals have argued for many decades that everyone, that’s *everyone*, including illegal immigrants, criminals, terrorists, and social misfits of all sizes, has an absolute “right,” a “right” mind you, to a full range of health care benefits, free if need be, and that the federal government has an obligation to honor this “right.”

Recently, however, it has come to the attention of Americans that there simply isn’t going to be enough money around to provide free, high quality health care to *everyone*; that some form of rationing will have to be employed. And guess what. A scattering of liberals are starting to show up at the town halls and tea parties asking if their Ecuadorian gardener is going to be in same line as they are in when it comes

time to get a new kidney; or whether their need for a kidney will be denied because the money is required to fund a growing demand for neo-natal care for illegal immigrants at a hospital just across the border from Juarez.

Is it not then just a matter of time before they beginning asking whether the super-sized, “big and tall” man who lives next door is as deserving of “free health care” as they, who eat nothing but flax seeds and broccoli; or whether the alcoholic is worth treating at all; or if a family should have the “right” to “burden” the health care system with a “special child” if this birth could be avoided by abortion? Hard times produce hard decisions. And interesting politics.

AMATEUR HOUR.

Last year, Democratic primary voters were offered a choice, a stark and momentous choice. Hillary? Or Barack? Barack? Or Hillary? What to do? Here’s how Hillary chose to frame the question:

It’s 3:00 a.m., and your children are safe and asleep. But there is a phone in the White House and its ringing. Something is happening in the world. Your vote decides who will answer the call. Whether it’s someone who knows the world’s leaders, knows the military, someone tested and ready to lead in a dangerous world. It’s 3:00 a.m., and your children are safe and asleep. Who do you want answering the phone?

In short, Hillary asked: As Americans, and as Democrats, do you want me and my nearly two decades in Washington, my experience with government at the highest levels, my lifelong dedication to government and to “public service?” Or do you want the new guy, the guy who has never held a job for more than a couple of years, whose ambition seems directed simply at being ambitious; the guy who has been in Washington for a cup of coffee, who has no executive experience, no real experience of any sort at all?

The Democrats made their choice. And it was not Hillary. If there were “do-overs” in presidential politics, one can’t help but wonder if they would make the same choice.

Throughout the 2008 campaign season, the Democratic Party promoted its candidates as a response to George W. Bush’s alleged incompetence. Bush was dumb. He couldn’t speak. He gave jobs to fellow incompetents, like Hurricane Katrina screw-up and onetime FEMA Director Michael Brown. He didn’t listen to his generals. *Et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseam.*

The Democrats promised something better, something stronger, something less embarrassing. They promised professionalism and competence. So how’s that working out for them?

The conventional wisdom on the left and in the mainstream media is that President Obama is struggling right now because he is trying to do too much, too quickly. He is aggressive and dedicated; committed to changing the nation for the better and doing it immediately, while his mandate still carries some cachet. A related, less fawning explanation, offered by less fawning analysts, is that Obama misread his mandate, that he misunderstood voters’ affection for him as affection for his policies. The electorate didn’t move as far left as Team Obama had imagined, and the President is therefore struggling to come to grips with the level of opposition to some of his policy proposals.

This is all well and good, of course. But, in our opinion, it’s also, by and large irrelevant, even if true. What matters here and what explains Obama’s freshman-year struggles is that he, his staff, and his supposed enforcers are just really very bad at this. And to be honest, that’s putting it mildly and gently. Barack Obama may speak mellifluously and have better syntax than his predecessor. But he is easily as incompetent as any president this nation has had since Jimmy Carter, and certainly more so than “poor George.”

Not that any of this should be a surprise to anyone – anyone, that is, who has been paying the least bit of attention to the way the Obama administration has behaved in office. Between Obama’s late-night run to Blockbuster to find a gift for British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his inability to fill critical administration positions – with anyone but tax cheats, that is – it was clear very early on that Obama’s claims to “competence” were exaggerated. Just how exceedingly exaggerated, though, wasn’t clear until recently.

Some of the Obama team’s screw-ups are mind-numbingly stupid yet, at the same time, harmless. For example, last week, President Obama hosted a conference call for 1,000 of the nation’s most prominent rabbis. The purpose of the call was to shore up support for the President’s flagging health care reform effort, to emphasize the ostensibly moral component of reform and to convince the rabbis to serve as shills for the administration.

The stupid part of the call (other than the expectation that the rabbis would be pleased to be used as political pawns) actually occurred before the President came on line. Apparently, the “hold music” prior to the appearance of the call’s star was “Deutschland Uber Alles.” Did we mention that the call was for 1,000 rabbis? According to Tevi Troy, a former deputy secretary of health and human services under Bush, “A number of rabbis apparently expressed discomfort with this choice of music.” No kidding.

Some of the Obama screw-ups are equally stupid and mildly amusing, but notably less harmless. Over the weekend, Mark Steyn noted a story in *Nashua Telegraph* describing the city’s report on its use of \$16.1 million in stimulus funds. Nashua is New Hampshire’s second biggest city, and, according to the story, used the stimulus money well . . . errr . . . used it, anyway. To wit:

The report also revealed that through the end of June that stimulus money created or saved 796 jobs, with 700 of those state workers who did not have to

get laid off thanks to the federal grants, [Acting State Stimulus Office Director Orville “Bud”] Fitch said.

Did you catch that? Stimulus equals more state workers, at least according to the Obama formula. Or as Steyn put it, “The ‘stimulus’ is advancing an already bloated statism at the expense of the real economy.” Good stuff.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of the Obama blunders have been neither amusing nor harmless. Most have been deadly serious, if underreported. Consider, if you will, the case of CIA Director Leon Panetta. Panetta, you may recall, made quite a splash earlier this summer when, shortly after declaring that the CIA doesn’t lie to Congress, he rushed up to Capitol Hill to proclaim to the world that the CIA had, in fact, lied to Congress – at the direction of Sith Lord Dick Cheney. What you may not recall – largely because it has shockingly gone unreported by the mainstream press – is the aftermath to Panetta’s breathless and scandalized declarations. The author Joseph Finder tells the story at *The Daily Beast*, a news and opinion web site published by (the former editor of *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*) Tina Brown:

CIA Director Leon Panetta stunned Washington earlier this summer by disclosing, in an emergency closed-door briefing to Congress, that for the last eight years, the agency he now runs illegally concealed a secret terrorist-assassination program. The reaction was predictably explosive. The House intelligence-oversight committee launched a major investigation. Here was official confirmation, from the very top, that the CIA in the Bush years had been flagrantly and systematically violating the National Security Act of 1947.

But according to a half-dozen sources, including several very senior, recently retired CIA officials, clandestine-service

officers, and Cabinet-level officials from the Bush administration, the real story is at once more innocent—Panetta was mistaken; no law was broken—and far more troubling: an inexperienced CIA director, unfamiliar with how his vast, complicated agency works, unable to trust senior officials within his own agency, and desperate to keep his hands clean, screwed up.

The Daily Beast has learned that shortly after his electrifying June 24 disclosure, Panetta spoke personally with each of his three predecessors – George Tenet, Porter Goss, and Michael Hayden – and only then realized the mistake he’d made about the program. An innocent mistake, but the consequences of his gaffe, which he’s unable to admit without damaging his own reputation further, will likely subject U.S. intelligence capabilities to unnecessary and intrusive oversight for years to come.

So the already over-overseen CIA gets some extended and gratuitous oversight, while the Speaker of the House gets some cover for her ridiculous and patently contrived claim that the CIA lied to her about water-boarding and the like – all because the Obama Team’s hand-picked CIA director wet his pants. Super.

Sadly, the list goes on and on. Cash for Clunkers? It’s been a remarkable “success” according to the media – if, that is, your only measure of success is getting people to take free money. Something about the fact that the initial budget had to be trebled to stave off disaster and that the plan, nonetheless, ended months early might cause one to question the administration’s management skills.

In Iraq, now the forgotten war, violence is once again ramping up, even as the Obama team continues with its plans to draw down troops and relinquish control of security matters. When Obama was elected, many foreign affairs analysts worried that he would give back

the victory that “the surge” had won. Does anyone doubt any longer that this is a very real possibility, a likelihood, in fact?

Late on Friday, word came from the White House that the ten-year deficit forecasts would be revised upward . . . again . . . this time to just over \$9 trillion. By way of comparison, Harvard economist Greg Mankiw reminds us that the federal debt – which “is the accumulation from [all] past budget deficits” – currently stands at a “mere” \$7.4 trillion, roughly 15% lower than the Obama team’s current *deficit* forecasts.

We note as an addendum to this story that the announcement about the deficit came just moments after the President and his family headed out for their vacation on fashionable Martha’s Vineyard. As labor attorney Peter Kirsanow noted “the optics of Obama going on vacation to Martha’s Vineyard just as his administration reveals that the federal deficit will be \$2 trillion higher than originally projected are atrocious.” We’ll say.

Needless to say, we’re a touch alarmed at the scale and scope of the administration’s ineptitude. We always thought that Obama was something of an empty suit, but we took solace in the fact that he surrounded himself with so many veterans of the Clinton administration, believing, wrongly, that experience would, at the very least, translate into some level of competence. Of course, in so thinking, we ignore the Clinton folks’ own history of incompetence. 1993, you may recall, was not a particularly great year in the annals of “good government.” And nor, for that matter, was it a particularly great year in the annals of the Democratic Party. And the parallels between that year and this one are beginning to look rather ominous.

Last week, Charlie Cook, the “gold standard” of election forecasters, declared that Obama and his fellow Democrats are at risk of repeating the mistakes of the past. Specifically, he wrote:

These [most recent poll] data confirm anecdotal evidence, and our own view, that the situation this summer has

slipped completely out of control for President Obama and Congressional Democrats. Today, The Cook Political Report’s Congressional election model, based on individual races, is pointing toward a net Democratic loss of between six and 12 seats, but our sense, factoring in macro-political dynamics is that this is far too low.

At this point, Cook believes that “the chances of Democratic losses going higher than 20 seats is just as good as the chances of Democratic losses going lower than 20 seats,” which, given the GOP’s complete collapse last November is, frankly, remarkable. Up until this moment, it never occurred to us that it was even remotely possible that the GOP would challenge for control of the House in next year’s midterm election. It still strikes us as highly unlikely, but if Cook is seeing as many as 20 seats changing hands right now, a change in the House majority is at least possible.

The principal reason to believe that the Republicans will not retake the House next year is the fact that they are the Republicans, the proverbial “stupid party,” which has done almost nothing whatsoever to deserve its newfound and growing popularity and almost nothing to cause it. The GOP just happens to be in the right place at the right time, beneficiary of Obama’s self-inflicted meltdown. Not that Republicans can’t still screw it up. They can. And they might.

That notwithstanding, we think that it is only a very short matter of time before you see Democratic candidates running away from Obama, even farther and faster than many Republican candidates ran away from Bush last year. Obama was a godsend to Democrats in 2008, but he appears ready to make one of the quickest transitions to millstone in American political history.

But such are the wages of incompetence.

At some point, it will be incumbent upon the political “thinkers” in this country to acknowledge the fact that presidential incompetence is, in large part, a derivative of a political culture that expects far too much of its political actors and of the president in particular. Just because he is the “most powerful man in the world,” doesn’t mean he is all that powerful, relatively speaking. A president who tries to be all things to everyone is bound to fail, particularly when he has precious little experience and appears unwilling to acknowledge his own limitations.

Barack Obama promised us the moon. He promised hope and change. He promised a better America. Those are promises he can’t keep. No man can keep them. But they are especially difficult for a man whose sole claim to fame prior to his election was that he read off of a teleprompter rather well.

Incompetence, they name is Barack.

Get used to it.

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