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## THEY SAID IT

Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned.

This has given rise to different forms of agnosticism and relativism which have led philosophical research to lose its way in the shifting sands of widespread scepticism. Recent times have seen the rise to prominence of various doctrines which tend to devalue even the truths which had been judged certain. A legitimate plurality of positions has yielded to an undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of today's most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth. Even certain conceptions of life coming from the East betray this lack of confidence, denying truth its exclusive character and assuming that truth reveals itself equally in different doctrines, even if they contradict one another. On this understanding, everything is reduced to opinion; and there is a sense of being adrift. While, on the one hand, philosophical thinking has succeeded in coming closer to the reality of human life and its forms of expression, it has also tended to pursue issues—existential, hermeneutical or linguistic—which ignore the radical question of the truth about personal existence, about being and about God. Hence we see among the men and women of our time, and not just in some philosophers, attitudes of widespread distrust of the human being's great capacity for knowledge. With a false modesty, people rest content with partial and provisional truths, no longer seeking to ask radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence.

Pope John Paul II, "*Fides et Ratio*," September 15, 1998.

## POPE BENEDICT AND THE CULTURAL COUNTERMARCH.

If you tried very hard to keep track of all of our "running themes" here at The Political Forum, you might not have time for anything else. We have more than a few, we'll readily admit. One of the most important, though, in terms of the future of the United States, is that Washington is not the principal front in the battle for the heart and soul of the nation, but merely the place where the score is kept. To put this in another way, Washington is simply a reflection of the attitudes, educational priorities, scope of civic involvement, and moral virility demonstrated at the state and local levels, in the schools and universities, in literature and art, and, most especially, in the family.

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Given this, we think that likely the most important story of last week was one that originated not in Washington, but in Rome, of all places. Actually, it came from Vatican City, as Damian Thompson, the religious beat writer for *The Telegraph* of London, reported:

The Vatican has announced that Pope Benedict is setting up special provision for Anglicans, including married clergy, who want to convert to Rome together, preserving aspects of Anglican liturgy. They will be given their own pastoral supervision, according to this press release from the Vatican:

“In this Apostolic Constitution the Holy Father has introduced a canonical structure that provides for such corporate reunion by establishing Personal Ordinariates which will allow former Anglicans to enter full communion with the Catholic Church while preserving elements of the distinctive Anglican spiritual and liturgical patrimony.”

Saying that this is a big deal doesn't really cover just how big a deal this really is. This is not only a very big deal for the Anglican Communion and for the Catholic Church, but it is, by extension, a very big deal for the United States as it tries desperately to maintain some semblance of its cultural and religious inheritance.

What Pope Benedict has done here is to reach out to the vast global Anglican Church and specifically to those practitioners who are upset with the political correctness and the post-modern spirit that has largely overtaken the Church of England. You may recall that a great many Anglicans broke away from the C of E a few years back, declining to join the Archbishop of Canterbury and his aggressively liberal minions in the American Episcopal Church (ECUSA) in the recognition and ordination of openly gay celebrants and bishops. The African arm of the Anglican Church, which assumed a leadership role for Anglican

traditionalists worldwide, is also, in the words of The anchoress, a writer and blogger for the Catholic journal *First Things*, the church's “most vibrantly growing arm.” And now, these traditionalists have been invited by the Pope to return to their ancestral home.

Now, of course, Catholics and/or former Catholics on the left are appalled by this development. They claim to be unhappy that Pope Benedict has reached out to the “reactionaries” and anti-gays in the Anglican Communion. You'll forgive us, though, if we think that the real reason that this is so upsetting to the left is that it will all but certainly increase the reach of the papacy worldwide and increase the vibrancy of the Catholic Church in Africa as well as throughout the Anglosphere, notably here in the good old U.S. of A.

In any case, no one anywhere should be surprised by this, least not you, gentle readers, given that we predicted this fifteen months ago in an article on the seriousness with which Pope Benedict is expanding ecumenism and fostering a united Christian front to serve as a “bulwark against further liberalization and further radicalization of Western society as a whole.” In that piece (“Fides et Ration.” July 21, 2008) we quoted from, among others, the aforementioned journalist Damian Thompson:

The Pope is supporting moves by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to construct a model whereby a group of rebel conservative Anglicans, the Traditional Anglican Communion, can be received en masse and occupy their own structures inside the Roman Catholic Church. This model – which is being constructed in secret – could serve as a blueprint for mainstream Anglicans wanting to convert as a group . . .

And . . .

The Catholic Church will expand its provision of “Anglican Use” parishes in the United States in order to allow whole communities of traditionalist Anglicans into the Roman fold,

a senior Catholic archbishop has announced. The Most Rev John J Myers, Archbishop of Newark and Ecclesiastical Delegate for the Pastoral Provision, told a conference of ex-Anglicans on Friday that “we are working on expanding the mandate of the Pastoral Provision [of Catholic parishes using Anglican-inspired services] to include those clergy and faithful of ‘continuing Anglican communities’.

“We are striving to increase awareness of our apostolate to Anglican Christians who desire to be reconciled with the Holy See. We have experienced the wonder of several Episcopal bishops entering into full communion with the Catholic Church and we continue to receive requests from priests and laity about the Pastoral Provision.”

What we’ll be left with, then, is a Catholic Church that is bigger, more vibrant, and, according to many (including the anchoress) more aware of its liturgical excesses since Vatican II. We’ll also have a more coherent and more effectively led erstwhile Anglican community both here at home and throughout the world. And the implications are potentially epic, not just or necessarily politically, but culturally as well.

As we wrote last July, Pope Benedict is now:

offering actual, tangible sanctuary for those who seek to escape the influence of post-modern value systems on their religion. In so doing, he is bolstering Christianity and rededicating the Catholic Church to “catholicism,” or universality. The Church stands as a shelter against post-modernism, secularism, and nihilism, not just for Catholics but for all Christians and, indeed, for all men.

The irony in this confrontation and of the Pope’s boldness simply cannot be overstated.

Last week, the author and publisher Roger Kimball asked “When will voters begin that long countermarch through the institutions in order to take back the country?” This, of course, is his (better known) variant on the theme we discussed at the top of this piece, the notion that what really matters in the determination of America’s future are local and civic institutions.

To answer his question, if Pope Benedict and the global Anglican Communion are any measure, then the countermarch has begun.

## THE PERSONALITY IS POLITICAL.

Sometimes, we’re not sure what to believe about President Obama. Or, perhaps more accurately, we’re not sure whom to believe about him. As you might guess, we spend far more time than is healthy reading about politics, the political environment, and, especially about the President and his various policy decisions and/or disasters. Sometimes, it all starts to run together and we worry that we have fallen into a trap, believing that what was “partisan sniping” last year is “insightful commentary” this year, and what was insightful commentary last year is now just partisan hogwash.

For example, when we saw last week that the former Bush speechwriter and would-be GOP savior David Frum had written a new piece entitled “Will the Rule of Law Survive Obama?” we read it eagerly, hoping to learn what dastardly deeds Obama is doing to wreck the country and destroy our lives. But then it occurred to us that we had read this piece before. Well, not this one, exactly, but countless others like it, only focused on a different President and a different rule of law. Not that we don’t doubt that a bright and talented guy like Frum has a point. But if you Google “rule of law survive” and “President” you get just under 8,000 hits. And while we didn’t sort through them one by one, it appears that a very high percentage of these hits are about President *Bush*, not President Obama, which is to say that sometimes the commentary about politics and presidents gets a little stale, to put it mildly.

Now, we don't mean to say that President Bush and President Obama are the same. They are not. Nor do we mean to say that all those who criticize Obama are just as nutty as were the overwhelming majority of those who railed unceasingly and unthinkingly against Bush. They are not. And, for the record, we believe quite earnestly and fervently, that many of the things that President Obama has done, will do, or promises to do will damage the country, both in the short and the long term.

Nevertheless, the fact that many on the right *sound* like many of those on the left did just a year ago and that many on the left who criticize those on the right for attacking the president sound like those on the right did just a year ago raises a couple of important points about the nature of political discourse in this country at the present moment.

First, we should clarify that the manifest confusion over who is telling the truth about the political opposition and who is simply being hysterical and fomenting partisan animosity is, at least in part, intentionally sown. By using the language and the trappings of bona fide legal and moral arguments against political figures on the right, the left knows full well that it can cast dubious but useful aspersions on its political opponents, thereby calling into question their legitimacy based on such nebulous concepts as "appearances," and generate the type of cynical distrust that leads the public to lump all political actors together and to conclude that "they all do it."

It's frustrating, but it's also smart politics. By muddying the waters, the left ensures that no one – outside of the handful of us who obsess over this stuff – can even hazard a guess who is truly dishonorable and who is merely the victim of a smear campaign.

What this means in turn, then, is that voters are, more or less, forced to make up their own minds independent of the views and commentary helpfully provided by the nation's media "experts." That is, most voters and potential voters have little choice but to tune out the battling talking heads, columnists,

and spinmeisters. And why wouldn't they? Everyone from *The New York Times* to *The Wall Street Journal*; from Fox News to MSNBC pays countless "experts" countless gobs of cash to tell voters what to believe about the candidates and elected officials. And what one says, another repeats, almost verbatim, changing only the names and partisan affiliations. So voters judge their politicians based largely on personality and deportment.

This is, we think, bad news for the Obama administration.

Why? Well, we have all been told for two-and-a-half years now that Barack Obama is the ideal man; that he is kind, caring, incredibly intelligent, and dedicated to changing the country for the better. As the columnist Richard Cohen put it, "Barack Obama is pretty close to the most perfect person you will never get to know." And for the most part, the electorate bought this. Hook, line, and sinker. Barack Obama: the post-partisan, post-racial hopey-changer, and national healer.

The problem is that, much to Cohen's chagrin we're sure, Americans are finding that Barack is not perfect; that, among other things, he is both petty and petulant.

Most recently, for example, he has taken to publicly attacking, bullying, and threatening the one media organization that tends to portray him in a less than hagiographic light, which just happens to be the one media organization most watched by Americans, by far. In fact, it appears for all the world that he and his henchmen are almost Nixonian in their hatred of and determination to undermine Fox News, going so far as to ask other news organizations to exclude Fox from White House press pool coverage, a request which, by the way, actually compelled even the erstwhile Obama-worshipping mainstream press to recoil in disgust.

But, while Fox News is the most recent and highest profile object of the President's ire, it is by no means alone. During the campaign, for instance, we learned that Obama doesn't think very much of a great many

of the Americans whom he'd deigned to rule, most especially those who cling to guns and religion. But, what the heck, we all have likes and dislikes.

Of late, however, we've been learning that the disdain he feels for these particular sorts extends to virtually all Republicans and to anyone, of any race, creed, or color who dares to cross him publicly. In fact, it turns out that the "bitter clingers" and "typical white person" rants were more the rule for the President than the exception. As the historian Victor Davis Hanson put it:

At one time or another, Obama and his supporters have, rather scurrilously, insulted doctors, insurers, the police, tea-partiers and town-hallers, opponents of his health-care plan, non-compliant members of the media, and a host of other groups as either greedy, dishonest, treasonous, unpatriotic, moblike, racist, or in general worthy of disrespect.

Fewer and fewer Americans now believe that Obama — after just nine months of governance — is a uniter. In Obama's world, doctors carve out children's tonsils for profit, racist morons rant at legislators about losing their private health care, and trillions in borrowed money must be paid back by the greedy rich whose capital was unearned in the first place.

As more than one observer has noted, Obama seems to suffer from a problem similar to that suffered by the Islamist "peacemakers" in the Middle East, who are gracious, amiable, and reconciliatory when addressing Westerners and especially when speaking English, but who are equally insolent, violent, anti-Western, and anti-Semitic when facing their own people and speaking Arabic. This is not to say that Obama is anti-Western or anti-Semitic, only that he always allows the mask to slip when he is speaking to exclusively friendly audiences, taking nasty and unmatched swipes at President Bush, at Republicans in Congress, and at Republican and independent voters.

Between his constant whining about his predecessor's "mess"; his attacks on the opposition and suggestions that they shut up and get out of his way; his declaration that he can and should do whatever he wishes because he "won"; and his *Washington Post*-esque derision of Republicans who "do what they're told," President Obama is pressing into virgin territory for a president — at least for a modern president. Again, as countless commentators have noted, George W. Bush was gracious to Bill Clinton; Clinton was more than decent to George H.W. Bush; and Reagan was notably uncritical of his predecessor, despite the various "messes" he himself inherited.

Even if any of Obama's forerunners were occasionally hyper-critical and contemptuous of their opponents and of voters — and we don't doubt that were — they had the good sense to be so *in private*. Obama doesn't.

And this brings up another point about Obama and his team; one which we have made more than once before, namely that they just aren't very good at this; they are sadly ill-prepared to deal with the fallout from their own actions on the national level.

David Axelrod may be a fine political strategist *in Chicago*, but he is no Karl Rove, and he is certainly no Dick Morris. Rahm Emanuel may be a real go getter and a heckuva scrapper to have on your side, but he is also a primitive and coarse hammer, swinging away wildly in tight quarters. Anita Dunn may be a . . . well . . . ummm . . . she must be good at something, we suppose. But she is also a complete fool, citing and praising the greatest mass murderer in world history and then, in response, attacking the news organization that had the gall to cover her inanity.

What we have, then, is a White House that is vindictive, nasty, self-serving, and, perhaps worst of all, completely clueless about how this looks to the American public. Bill Clinton was a self-absorbed philanderer. George W. Bush was a stubborn spendthrift. George H. W. Bush was generally out of touch with the American public. But none was dumb enough to be overtly and aggressively spiteful in public.

And this is going to badly hurt the Obama presidency. Indeed, all things considered, this will hurt Obama more than it would any other president in recent memory because he ran as a healer and a righteous redeemer. He ran as the post-partisan gentleman. Yet he is governing like a Chicago gangster. For Obama, image was everything. And that image is being shattered, publicly and in living color.

More importantly, it is not being shattered by anyone in the media – either on Fox News or in the conservative press. It is being shattered by Obama himself; by his cheap, petty attacks on his opponents, by his constant whining about his predecessor's mistakes, by his apparent ignorance of the fact that, as the most powerful man in the world, he is being watched *all the time*.

Political scientists have lamented for years the public's tendency to judge its politicians based on personality rather than on policy predilections. We get that, we guess. But we also tend to have a little more faith in the public than do the academic "experts." As a general rule, personality tends to be a reasonable way to choose rulers. Certainly, it saved us, as a nation, from the personality-challenged John Kerry, Al Gore, and Michael Dukakis. It didn't save us from Bill Clinton. But then, it didn't need to. Clinton was a cad, of course, but he was also a pragmatist. And as such, he was able to change his behavior and his policies to suit the public mood.

We doubt seriously whether Barack Obama can be similarly flexible, which is to say that his personality may well doom him.

Time will tell, of course.

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