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THEY SAID IT

Beyond this flood a frozen continent
Lies dark and wild, beat with perpetual storms
Of whirlwind and dire hail, which on firm land
Thaws not, but gathers heap, and ruin seems
Of ancient pile; all else deep snow and ice,
A gulf profound as that Serbonian bog
Betwixt Damietta and Mount Casius old,
Where Armies whole have sunk: the parching air
Burns froze, and cold performs the effect of fire.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, 1667.

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A NANNYLESS WORLD.

This week, we are going to talk about Afghanistan. We're going to repeat some of what members of the pundit class have already said, restate a few things that we have already said, offer a few observations that have received little or no attention by anyone in this debate relative to how America got into this mess in the first place, and offer a few observations about what may lie ahead.

We will begin by noting that it is hypothetically possible for a nation with America's vast resources to turn a primitive country like Afghanistan into a reasonable facsimile of a civilized one. But it isn't going to happen. The cost of doing something such as that is far beyond the willingness of the American people to shoulder, especially during a time when the United States has virtually exhausted its line of credit, which means that living Americans would have to finance a good part of this effort out of their own pockets rather than simply borrowing the money in the name of their kids and grandkids.

We first put this idea forth last August in a piece entitled "First They Came For The Smokers; Then They Came For The Fatties," by noting that even the notoriously generous liberals are going to be reluctant to pursue expensive, idealistic initiatives now that they can no longer finance their generosity with borrowed money but must have their own "skin in the game."

A month later, in an article entitled "A Good Word For Hard Times," we elaborated further on this idea:

We also believe the government's coming rendezvous with the consequences of years and years of out-of control federal spending will give American foreign policy a more traditional, conservative bent. Not only will it have a dampening effect on the proliferation of liberal social engineering schemes abroad, but it will very likely put a nail in the coffin of the neoconservative

penchant for the kind of nation building that is currently going on in Iraq and Afghanistan.

During hard times, when Medicare spending is rationed and Social Security payments are means tested, the American people are simply not going to approve of spending billions upon billions of dollars, borrowed from China against their children's future, to make life easier for people in other nations, or for Marshall Plan-like projects to rebuild and restore countries that had been foolish enough to go to war with the United States.

It is theoretically possible, of course, that Barack can convince the American people that they have no choice but to continue the war in Afghanistan, that their security demands it. But that isn't going to happen either. For whatever reason, Barack's heart just isn't in the game and no one believes it is. Indeed, both the American people and the enemy could figure this out for themselves when he chose the absolute rock bottom number of new troops to commit to the project and put a public time limit on their stay there. Can anyone imagine FDR saying, immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, "Okay Tojo, you got 'til December 7, 1943 to surrender, or I'm going to pick up my marbles and go home."

Worse yet, Barack is making the same mistake that President Bush made when he tried to sell the American people on the idea that their security was dependent on turning the Iraqi people into democrats. We thought from the beginning that this was a stupid idea. But what we thought didn't matter. What mattered is that the American people didn't buy it either. We commented on this sad state of affairs six years ago in a November 27, 2003 article entitled "How Bush Could Lose The War In Iraq." To wit:

There has never been any question that America has the military power and the financial means to accomplish whatever

goal it sets for itself in Iraq . . . The ultimate question, when it comes down to victory or defeat, is not whether any of these outcomes are possible to achieve, but whether Americans believe that any of them are worth the effort . . . So the task ahead for the Bush administration, as we see it, involves convincing the American people once again that the battle over Iraq is directly — very directly — linked to American security.

The argument that the enemy over there killed 20 American soldiers but that that is okay because the Iraqi people now have more electricity than they had when Saddam was running the place simply won't sell. In fact, it's an insult. We believe it is safe to say that the vast majority of Americans don't give a damn whether the Iraqi people have electricity, or even candles for that matter, if the cost of providing them with this luxury is the life of a single American soldier.

Bush began the nation building bit because the national security argument lost steam when no weapons of mass destruction were found and Saddam was captured. Apparently, Barack has bought into it because General McCrystal told him that the pathway to a military victory is through the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. We don't know whether this is true or not, but it's a popular notion among the military brass these days, so what the heck. In any case, the fact is, as we said earlier, the American people aren't going to spend the blood and the money that it would take to find out.

Indeed, if the wise souls who run the United States government insist on attempting to civilize a third world country, in which most of the citizens can't read or write, have no respect for the rule of law, think honest elections are a joke, have no economy worth mentioning, and is dominated by street gangs and

crooked government officials, then American citizens are eventually going to ask them why they can't do it closer to home, say, for example, Detroit?

So, what happens next, you ask? Well, the first and most important step in attempting to make some intelligent guesses is to examine how the nation happened to find itself in this mess in the first place.

We could begin our examination at any one of a number of points in time. For example, we could start with the third Chapter of Genesis, or perhaps with the decision of the crowd in Jerusalem to tell Pilate to pardon Barabbas. Or we could start with the conclusion of any one of a large number of military confrontations that, as Hallam put it, "may justly be reckoned among those few battles of which a contrary event would have essentially varied the drama of the world in all its subsequent scenes." Creasy's classic book on this subject, inspired by Hallam, examined 15 such decisive battles from Marathon to Waterloo, and, needless to say, there have been numerous others since the Duke of Wellington whipped the murderous little Corsican's butt.

But, in the interests of space and time, we will begin in March 1947 with the introduction of give-'em-hell-Harry's "Truman Doctrine," which pledged that America would henceforth "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."

As part of this new doctrine, Truman initiated both the Marshall Plan and the policy of "containment," which together began a generous U.S. policy of aid and assistance to friendly governments around the world and surrounded the U.S.S.R. with a chain of defense pacts under which the United States agreed that an attack against any of the signatories of any of the pacts would be considered an attack against the United States.

This placed under U.S. protection all of the members of NATO (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, the U.K., Canada, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark and Iceland), all of the members of SEATO (Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan,

the Philippines, Thailand, and Great Britain), and all of the members of CENTO (Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Great Britain). Then, of course, he went to war in Korea.

In contrast to the period immediately after World War I, there were very few conservatives around to question whether the United States should so blatantly ignore President Washington's sage advice and commit itself heavily to the affairs of so many other nations. Moreover, those conservatives who were still around had neither the political clout nor the collective will to stand against the rising tide of public support in favor of a vast, global confrontation with Communism.

President Eisenhower was one of the few politicians of national stature who seems to have even thought much about it. Among the "grave implications" that he feared was the establishment of a large, permanent military, supported by an industrial complex built solely for the purpose of providing weapons to this force. He stated his concerns this way in his last speech as President on January 17, 1961.

A vital element in keeping the peace is our military establishment. Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction. Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea.

Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment.

We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence -- economic, political, even spiritual -- is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

Needless to say, Americans were much less excited by Eisenhower's cautionary note than they were with Jack Kennedy's dramatic, Wilsonian-like pledge, delivered *just three days later* in his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty," not just in the good old U.S. of A., but worldwide. To whit:

To those peoples in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

During the next half century, Eisenhower's military industrial complex became the nation's largest employer. And the United States plunged headlong into myriad wars and foreign entanglements on a scale that would have delighted Woodrow Wilson and sown despair among the small remaining remnant of the old-line conservatives who remembered not

just Eisenhower's warning but Henry Cabot Lodge Sr.'s justly famous speech against Wilson's League of Nations many years earlier. To wit: "We would not have our politics distracted and embittered by the dissensions of other lands. We would not have our country's vigour exhausted or her moral force abated, by everlasting meddling and muddling in every quarrel, great and small, which afflicts the world . . ."

So here "we" are today. The greatest global power that the world has ever known, up to its neck "in every quarrel, great and small, which afflicts the world," expending vast amounts of blood and treasure on conflicts no one understands in places that most Americans couldn't find on a map, while fighting a miserable war in a no account, backwater, hell hole of a nation against a rag-tag, blood thirsty cult of religious fanatics, under the direction of a commander-in-chief who has no idea how to win, what winning would look like if he stumbled across it, or if winning even matters, and doing so by employing a hugely expensive strategy of buying the "friendship" of "the locals" with everything from vast sums of money to bottles of Viagra.

Needless to say, this can't last. Right or wrong, a majority of the American people are beginning to believe that it's not only too expensive, but wasteful, stupid, and lacking in entertainment value. If we're right about this, then the answer to the question asked above – what happens next? -- is that Afghanistan will likely mark the ignoble end to the nobly begun but ultimately foolhardy journey launched, as we said earlier, by Harry Truman's promise that the United States would, henceforth, "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures," seconded later by Jack Kennedy's promise to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty," and trumped by George W. Bush's determination "to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

Now, we are not saying here that the United States will cease playing in the great global sandbox. We are simply predicting that the American people -- war weary, short of money, burdened by huge deficits, facing increasingly higher taxes, and anticipating some rather dire consequences associated with a rapidly aging population -- are going to force the government to opt out of the make-the-world-safe-for-democracy rat race that has been the centerpiece of American foreign policy for the past sixty years or so; to opt out of long, bloody, highly expensive, tens-of-thousands-of-boots-on-the-ground military operations that have become one of the most objectionable characteristics of the government's insistence on trying to change the world; to opt out of the belief that America has some sort of moral obligation to spend billions of dollars rebuilding the infrastructure and economy of any nation that is foolish enough to go to war with it; and to opt into a policy of defending itself in the much cheaper and more ancient approach to dealing with enemies, that is, by using overwhelming force to swiftly and mercilessly neutralize any nation, concentration of individuals, and or even specific individuals who attack or pose an imminent threat to America or to its assets at home or abroad.

Only time will tell how the world will get along without a global nanny with a big stick. Some small nations are likely to get stomped in much the same way that Kuwait did almost 20 years ago. But unlike Kuwait back then, these new victim nations will stay stomped. Some small nations will have to bend a knee to larger ones like Russia and China. Some, like Israel, Taiwan, and yes, even Japan, will have to prepare to defend themselves without the help of their one-time protector, the good old U.S. of A, but they have almost certainly been concentrating on this effort ever since Barack won the election. America's war against Islamic terrorists will become more up close and personal. But it's not clear that any more Americans will die or be wounded in this new iteration than have died and were wounded during the wars "over there to keep from having fight them here." The victims will just come from a different segment of society, i.e., civilian rather than military.

Barack will get credit or blame depending upon the person pointing the finger. But it won't really be his fault. Despite what we said about the Truman Doctrine, the truth is that the path to this mess began a long time ago in a garden that was occupied a man, a woman, a snake, and an apple tree.

OBAMA SOFT ON CHINA? WHO DIDN'T KNOW?

Last month, when President Obama visited China, he disappointed a great many of his supporters, who had hoped that he would stand up to the Butchers of Beijing and tell them to quit being . . . well . . . butchers. But he didn't. He didn't do much of anything, actually. He made a few perfunctory comments about partnership and human rights and then went on about his way. This was just as the Chinese had wanted him to do, which, of course, is why some of his erstwhile most ardent supporters were upset.

Long-time, senior member of the liberal foreign policy establishment, Leslie Gelb, for example, railed on the amateurism in the White House and complained that Obama's biggest failure was his unwillingness to take a leadership role on global issues as they pertain to Asia.

Politico's Mike Allen was even harsher, grumbling that:

Obama's minimalist approach was most consequential in China, where he did not meet with Christians, dissidents or bloggers, or directly challenge his hosts for repressive tactics that are again on the rise.

The Chinese in turn rebuffed longstanding U.S. concerns -- whether on human rights, Iran or currency policy -- in a heavily stage-managed visit where China, not Obama, clearly sought the upper hand.

It should surprise no one that the left was hardly alone in knocking President Obama for his curiously deferential behavior in Beijing. The right was equally

upset, if not more so. Take the natural inclination of right-wingers to oppose anything that Obama does, add in the equally natural right-wing inclination to loathe the Chinese Communists, and you wind up with something like the following, penned by *National Review's* Jay Nordlinger:

When U.S. presidents go to China, as President Obama did recently, they should recognize that they are visiting an unfree state. And they should signal to the public — especially the Chinese public — that they indeed have this recognition. Obama did not really do this. He did not give much heart or comfort to liberals, dissidents, democrats, prisoners. He did not insist on a wide television audience. Basically, he allowed the Chinese government to stage-manage his visit. He did not do any boat-rocking.

And, in my view, U.S. presidents — and all Free World leaders — have an obligation to do a little boat-rocking. To discomfort the Chinese authorities just a little.

We know that the Obama administration is not too keen to emphasize human rights — that is so yesterday, so George W. Bush. But what did Obama get for his “good behavior” in China? Did the PRC give him anything on currency, on the environment, on Iran, on North Korea? What practical benefit did our president’s non-boat-rocking bring? . . .

Every president should keep an eye, or half an eye, on human rights. And he should stand for liberty in the world, a universal liberty. You recall what the Iranian protesters chanted in the streets: “Obama! Obama! Either you’re with them [the theocratic regime] or you’re with us.” We have to deal with

many bad actors in the world, including in Tehran and Beijing. But woe to us if we forget our principles altogether . . .

Yes, yes, pragmatism has a proud place. We are all “realists,” to a degree. But what is Obama gaining for his bows in various forms around the world? He refused to meet with the Dalai Lama in Washington, in advance of his trip to Beijing. Okay. But what good did this snub of a great, important man do? What cold-eyed, Machiavellian, Kissingerian deal resulted?

In any event, it is simply perverse for a president to go to a country with a gulag — in China, it’s called “laogai” — and give no signal whatsoever that he knows it: that he knows he is in a country with a gulag.

Now, for the record, we like Jay Nordlinger, a great deal. He’s one of our favorite writers on culture and arts, among other things. And, moreover, we agree with him. An American president *should* recognize that he is visiting an unfree state and *should* acknowledge the nasty, murderous nature of the regime in Beijing. That said, what a president should do and what *this* President *can* do are two radically different things.

The problem here is that what Obama is “getting” from the Chinese is every bit as important as any “Machiavellian Kissingerian” deal, at least to him and to his agenda, and, for the time being, maybe to the rest of us as well. It’s just not as obvious or as publicly acknowledged as would be some sort of big-time political deal.

In brief, the response to Gelb’s gripes, the explanation for Allen’s complaints, and the answer to Nordlinger’s questions is that a debtor nation that wishes not just to remain a debtor nation but to take on even more debt doesn’t (and please excuse our language here, but no other phrase seems appropriate) piss on or piss off its banker.

The fact of the matter is that everything that matters to President Obama – from health care reform to stimulus; from cap-and-trade to the economic recovery – hinges on the Chinese and, in most cases, on the willingness of the Chinese to continue to finance American debt.

As things stand today, the Chinese hold some \$800 billion in American Treasury securities, up more than 10% since the start of the year. And unless they continue to buy those securities, Obama is screwed. And so is his dream of a liberal “transformation.”

As government agencies are wont to do when numbers are bad, the Congressional Budget Office released its latest deficit estimates this past Friday, hoping no one would notice. But how could we not? According to Reuters:

In October and November, the government spent \$292 billion more than it took in, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said.

That was even worse than the same period last year, when the government was on its way to posting a record \$1.4 trillion deficit for the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30.

The budget deficit was \$176.4 billion in October, according to Treasury Department records, and the CBO estimated the deficit for November will have come in at \$115 billion.

Add to these numbers a plan for health care reform, a plan for cap-and-trade restrictions that will further stall economic growth, and the ever-increasing threat of a second stimulus bill/“jobs bill,” and the picture that emerges is that of a president who has every personal incentive to avoid annoying or angering or in any way disturbing the people who make this kind of spending binge possible. Every school boy knows that presidents rise and fall with GDP and unemployment numbers. And while the economy is

technically growing, the third quarter GDP numbers, revised downward last week, come amid increases in government spending of 11.4 and 7.9% over the second and third quarters respectively, which is to say that China is helping to finance the American recovery.

So why didn't Obama challenge the Chinese on human rights or freedom or Taiwan or anything else? Because he couldn't. They own him. He knows it. And they know it. And, more to the point, it is hardly an accident.

Oddly enough, this situation reminds us of the mess that the Soviet Union was in when the Reagan White House set about undermining and eventually destroying it. We first discussed the strategy that Reagan and his foreign policy team used in an April 9, 2002 article entitled “Whither China?”

In that piece, we cited a handful of declassified National Security directives that provided extensive details on how the Reagan national security team, which included our old friend Roger Robinson, (then the Senior Director of International Economic Affairs in President Reagan's National Security Council) went about taking advantage of the fact that the Soviet economy was built almost exclusively on its ability to generate income from the nation's vast mineral wealth and specifically from its oil riches.

In essence, what we said was that Reagan knew that the Soviet economy was built on smoke and mirrors, that its socialism was highly destructive, and that that destruction was both exacerbated and masked by the country's energy wealth. A dip in the price of energy and voila, the collapse of the Soviet economy and eventually of the Soviet Union itself.

Ironically, the point of that piece was to suggest that President Bush should consider taking a similar approach to seeking a regime change in China. Now, a short seven and a half years later, we are concerned that we are witnessing the Chinese doing it to the United States.

The parallels aren't perfect, of course, which is to say that we wouldn't go so far as to say that the American economy is built on smoke and mirrors, though we will say that it is unquestionably built on government debt and on foreign financing of that debt. And given that the Chinese are the largest foreign owners of American government debt, the American economy is, to a great extent, built on Chinese willingness to continue to finance it.

The same goes for Obama's vision of post-transformation America, only even more so. Whether he likes it or not, this transformation is impossible without massive and increasing government debt, which is to say that it is impossible without Chinese sanction. And anybody who thinks that the ChiComms don't know this and aren't exploiting this to their benefit simply hasn't been paying attention.

What does all this mean? Well, for the time being it means that China has a free hand to do whatever it pleases, domestically and internationally. It means that the United States is in an unprecedented and deeply troubling position of impotence. It also means that the world is likely to get far more complicated in the next twelve months. And far more dangerous.

In the above piece, we conclude that, in the nannyless global state of nature, "Some small nations are likely to get stomped in much the same way that Kuwait did almost 20 years ago. But unlike Kuwait back then, these new victim nations will stay stomped." Some of these countries will, of course, be stomped by China, who has been stomping poor, unsuspecting souls all over Africa for years now, in search of ever-precious oil and will continue to do so. And it's going to get worse. Seriously. Does anyone actually believe that Obama would have the will or the desire to stop his bankers from, say, exploiting the oil fields of West Africa and keeping their yield for themselves?

Above, we also note that "Some [nations], like Israel, Taiwan, and yes, even Japan, will have to prepare to defend themselves." President Obama has stated repeatedly that his ultimate goal is a world free of nuclear weapons and free of the threat of war regarding nuclear weapons. That may be. But in the short term, he's going to end up with two more nations (Japan and Taiwan) doing whatever is necessary to expand the "nuclear club" so that they have the wherewithal to defend themselves against Chinese aggression and/or the whims of North Korea's Lil' Kim. He's also going to end up with a bunch of Israelis – right, left, and otherwise – concluding that they have no choice but to go to war against Iran. Obama has no leverage over the Chinese and can therefore not compel them (or the Russians) to support real and substantive action against the Mad Mullahs, and the Israelis are going to conclude, rightly, that this means that they are on their own.

If there is one thing that anyone, anywhere could have concluded about Barack Obama this early in his presidency, it's that he is absolutely and completely disinterested in global events, except in how they affect his domestic agenda. And in the case of any actions that may involve the Chinese, his only interest right now is not to rock the boat, given his plans to spend as much of China's newfound wealth as possible.

Political observers have been wondering for three weeks now why Obama, ostensibly the most powerful man on the planet, deigned to bow to Chinese President Hu Jintao. What we're wondering, by contrast, is why he stopped there.

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