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THEY SAID IT

Well, I'm not going to point any moral;
I'll leave that for yourself
Maybe you're still walking, you're still talking
You'd like to keep your health.
But every time I read the papers
That old feeling comes on;
We're – waist deep in the Big Muddy
And the big fool says to push on.

“Waste Deep In The Big Muddy,” song by Pete Seeger, 1967.

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AFTER MASSACHUSETTS.

So Scott Brown is on his way to Washington to take his place in the Senate seat formerly owned and operated by the Kennedy family. The Democrats' Senate super-majority is now dead, just six months after it was born. Health care “reform” too is likely dead, at least as it currently exists. And every pundit, talking head, political consultant, strategist, politician, and hack in the country – outside of the White House, that is – is trying to figure out what this all means for the Obama presidency and, more to the point, how that presidency can be saved.

As for those hacks in the White House, it appears for all the world that they are still not sure that this has anything to do with them or with their guy. For the time being at least, they're sticking with the line that Brown's victory should not be seen as a rejection of Obama so much as a rejection of George W. Bush – you know, the guy who left for Dallas over a year ago and hasn't been on a ballot in more than five years.

Leaving aside this latter group, filled as it is with sycophants, yes-men, and true believers, most of those who have taken a look at this issue have approached it from the perspective of the President himself. What can *he* do to change the political tenor? How can *he* win back the independents who appear to be leaving him? How does *he* save his presidency and avoid being a one-termer?

That's all well and good, we suppose. But the focus on the President is, we think, far too simplistic and even a bit hyperbolic. Yes, Obama will have to accept some alterations in his political strategy to salvage his presidency. And yes, he will have to execute those changes as well. All of which is to say that he will, obviously, play a critical role in the great political contests to come. But he will not be the only person

involved in determining the viability of his presidency, not by a long shot. Indeed, a great many other figures may well play equally critical and perhaps even greater roles.

For starters, someone is going to have to create, design, test, and implement the changes in strategy necessary to begin the resuscitation process. In this White House, that will be David Axelrod's job. He is the President's chief political strategist and the guy responsible for the "hopeychange" meme that has dominated the political discourse for the better part of two-and-a-half years now.

To better understand the nature of the role that Axelrod will have to play in the White House if he is to keep his guy in office past January 20, 2013, it might be helpful to look, briefly, at the two better-known men who held the same basic position as Axelrod in the previous two administrations.

Outside of, perhaps, Dick Cheney, no man in the Bush administration was loathed, disparaged, and scorned more by left-wingers and the mainstream press (as if there's much difference) than Karl Rove. And there's a reason for that, namely the fact that Rove was George W. Bush's chief political advisor and, as such, was principally responsible for the strategies that got Bush elected and re-elected, a pair of sins unmatched in modern political history.

Now, for the record, we have always believed that Rove's role was exaggerated by Bush's political enemies, who were desperate for someone to blame for their own political misfortunes. And rather than blame the voters, and by extension, themselves, they instead blamed the "evil genius" who was, in the vernacular, "Bush's brain."

That said, Rove was an integral player in Bush's numerous successes, particularly the re-election campaign in 2004. As you may recall, most political analysts thought Bush was in serious trouble in '04, and many big-time political prognosticators, including most notably Charlie Cook and John Zogby, predicted a victory for his opponent, John Kerry. Bush's

problem, everyone agreed, was that the political middle didn't particularly care for him. And that meant certain political death.

Err . . . well . . . almost certain.

What Rove decided, early on, was that any attempt to appeal to the middle would be a failure anyway, given the mainstream disaffection for Bush and the two wars into which the nation had been drawn on his watch. So he completely disregarded the conventional wisdom that general election candidates *must* run to the center and instead ran his candidate hard to the right, which fired up his party's base. Rove understood that a significant percentage of nonaffiliated voters would stick with the incumbent in a time of war, meaning that the key to victory would be conservative affection and turnout for his candidate. His plan was absolutely, one-hundred percent in contravention of the conventional political wisdom. And it was dead right.

By contrast, Bill Clinton's political guru, the enigmatic Dick Morris, did in fact take his candidate to the middle, but did so in a very distinctive fashion. Morris, who had worked with Clinton in Arkansas and who was brought in to save the Clinton presidency after the 1994 midterm debacle, understood that the electorate intensely disliked both the status quo and the big government statism that had characterized the first two years of Clinton's term. So he had his guy repudiate both – with spectacular success.

Morris and Clinton were able to do so for a couple of reasons. First, and most notably, neither Clinton nor Morris had any attachment either to the status quo or to big-government leftism, meaning that both of these elements could be jettisoned without regret. Clinton was (and is) a creature of power, not ideology. He wanted to be president because he wanted to be president, not because he wanted to transform the world.

Second, Clinton could repudiate the left wing of his party because it was a sick and dying creature anyway. The liberals in Congress were ancient and,

moreover, they had no power base. The intellectual left was shriveled and weak as well, meaning that Clinton's repositioning, which Morris described as "triangulation," would meet little or no effective opposition on the left.

Now, contrast any and all of this with the task that faces Axelrod. For starters, unlike Rove, Axelrod can't hope to gain much by running his guy hard toward his base. There are numerous reasons for this, the most important one being that the progressive/liberal base is hardly big enough to sustain a nation-wide political movement.

The media and Democrats like to mock the Republicans as a "rump" Southern party, and there's some truth in that. But as survey after survey show, the rest of the country is still predominantly conservative, which is to say that the progressive base is itself a rump faction, and a comparatively small one at that, geographically relegated to a handful of urban enclaves. More to the point, running hard to the left would simply reinforce the status quo, or to put this in another way, it would fortify the distaste the public has acquired for Obama and his agenda. Our "post-partisan" president tried governing hard to the left and was rebuffed for it. To double down now would be monumentally stupid.

At the same time, Axelrod can hardly have Obama triangulate. For one thing, Obama wouldn't do it, *couldn't* do. And neither could Axelrod. By contrast to Clinton, Obama sees himself as something truly unique and distinctively special. By his own admission, he considers himself a transformative figure. And so, by the way, does Axelrod. Both are, at their core, leftist ideologues.

In any case, they couldn't discard their left-wing supporters if they wanted to. Though progressives may comprise a small portion of the electorate, they nevertheless represent that portion of the Democratic base that wields outsized influence. Unlike Clinton, Obama faces the "netroots," the left-liberal internet denizens who have wrested control of the party's agenda from its centrists, including, ironically, the

Clintonian Democratic Leadership Committee (DLC). In fact, Obama owes his rise to the netroots and he would not survive long without their support.

So what will Axelrod do with his client? It's hard to say at present, but it looks as if he will emulate neither Rove nor Morris; that he and Barack are so politically obtuse that they have decided to "stay the course," with a few, insignificantly minor and all but certain to be ineffective adjustments.

Simply stated, the Axelrod/Obama strategy appears to be to keep the product the same, but to attempt to repackage it in such a way as to appeal to the obviously significant vein of populism that has gripped the country and made life difficult for politicians of both parties. To say this is stupid would be a monumental understatement. But still, this is stupid.

There are, in general, two streams of populism in this country, one from the right and one from the left. As we noted in our forecast piece three weeks ago, the right-wing version worries about government mucking up business and personal liberty, while the left-wing version worries about business and personal liberty mucking up government.

Obviously, the right-wing strain is inaccessible to Obama, given that he and his coterie are considered by most Republicans and independents to be the very personification of the pointy-headed elites who screw things up by insisting that they are smarter than everyone else.

As for the left-wing strain, Obama will face two problems as he tries to make this his own. First, he happens to be the guy who bailed out and then took over two of the Big Three car companies, who bailed out the banks repeatedly with the approval and complicity of his tax-cheat Treasury Secretary, and the guy who enlisted the insurance companies, the pharmaceutical companies, and Wal-Mart in the effort to pass health care reform. We know, and have written numerous times, that he thinks voters are stupid, but this is probably over the top even for him.

Second, and more ominously, this populist shtick threatens the one aspect of the economic recovery that has been both consistent and positive, namely the bull market in equities. Does he think that last week's stock market losses were mere coincidence? Does he believe that all the talk about taxes, regulations, and the possibility that the Fed Chairman's re-nomination will be rejected was inconsequential? Does he think he can survive if he contributes to the exacerbation of the nation's economic fragility? If he does, he's nuts.

And that brings us, at long last, to the other people who will have a say in Barack Obama's attempt to salvage his presidency, the voters, or to be more precise, the independent voters.

We will concede that much of politics, especially presidential politics, is a cynical game predicated on fooling most of the people most of the time. But Obama and his team appear to have taken this cynicism to new and lofty heights. Their disdain for and dismissal of average Americans is, frankly, unprecedented. They really do think you (and we) are stupid. And they're going to continue to play on their expectation of stupidity as long as they possibly can.

Throughout the primary campaign in 2008, political commentators on the right warned Democrats that it would be a mistake to nominate a man as naïve, as inexperienced, and as supremely self-absorbed as Obama, no matter how attractive and eloquent he was. Talk about your chickens coming home to roost.

This morning, we learned that yet another Blue Dog House Democrat, this time Arkansas' Marion Berry, would rather retire than run for re-election and try to fight against both his Republican opponent and Team Obama. Berry's explanation for his decision is, we think, telling: According to the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*:

Berry recounted meetings with White House officials, reminiscent of some during the Clinton days, where he and others urged them not to force

Blue Dogs "off into that swamp" of supporting bills that would be unpopular with voters back home.

"I've been doing that with this White House, and they just don't seem to give it any credibility at all," Berry said. "They just kept telling us how good it was going to be. The president himself, when that was brought up in one group, said, 'Well, the big difference here and in '94 was you've got me.'"

We don't know whether to laugh or cry. He really said that? We'd quit too.

SNATCHING DEFEAT FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY?

For nearly six straight years, from sometime in 2003 to January 20, 2009, both the far left and the far right screamed endlessly about the invasion of Iraq, insisting that it was poorly conceived, poorly planned, poorly executed, and, most important of all, that it "distracted" the United States from its principle task, which apparently was blowing up the mountains of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan was the "good war," which meant, by virtue of elimination, that Iraq was the "bad war" – the one nobody but a handful of "neocons" (wink, wink) wanted; the one that was stupid and pointless; the one that caused the United States to "take its eye off the ball" in Afghanistan, and, most important, the one that was unwinnable.

Except that it was winnable. *Is* winnable. Is, in fact, being won.

We don't want to get too excited here, but the fact of the matter is that the war in Iraq, the war that was "lost," to borrow a phrase from the Senate's intrepid Majority Leader, Harry Reed, constitutes one of the most impressive and remarkable military victories in recent memory. The war *was* lost. But now it's won, or at least it's very close to being won.

Unfortunately, those two words, “very close,” are a problem. They denote the fact that nothing is over until it’s over, and that the victory nearly secured by the amazing and honorable American military can still be squandered. Moreover, it appears that the current administration may well be set on doing just that, ironically by taking its eye of the ball.

First, the good news, as told by the *Associated Press*:

The U.S. Marine Corps wrapped up nearly seven years in Iraq on Saturday, handing over duties to the Army and signaling the beginning of an accelerated withdrawal of American troops as the U.S. turns its focus away from the waning Iraqi war to a growing one in Afghanistan . . .

The Marines formally handed over control of Sunni-dominated Anbar, Iraq’s largest province, to the Army during a ceremony at a base in Ramadi — where some of the fiercest fighting of the war took place.

If all goes as planned, the last remaining Marines will be followed out by tens of thousands of soldiers in the coming months. President Obama has ordered all but 50,000 troops out of the country by Aug. 31, 2010, with most to depart after the March 7 parliamentary election. The remaining troops will leave by the end of 2011 under a U.S.-Iraqi security pact.

And next, the bad news, also told by the *Associated Press*, in the very same article, in fact, in the section we cut out with the ellipses above:

In Baghdad, meanwhile, Vice President Joe Biden held talks with Iraqi leaders amid growing tensions over plans to ban election candidates because of suspected links to Saddam Hussein’s regime.

The White House worries the bans could raise questions over the fairness of the March 7 parliamentary elections, which are seen as an important step in the American pullout timetable and breaking political stalemates over key issues such as dividing Iraq’s oil revenue.

The bad news here can be divided into two parts. First, the White House is “worried” about something in Iraq, something that has specifically to do with the sectarian problems that have plagued that nation since its liberation, and assigns it such a high priority as to send the Vice President. This is nuts, just flat-out nuts.

Biden is a fool. That goes without saying. But in this instance, he’s worse than a fool – far worse. Biden, you may recall is the guy who spent most of the last seven years championing the idea that Iraq’s Sunnis and Shiites are just too distasteful ever to get along and that the country should, therefore, be divided into three countries, one for the Shiites, one for the Sunni Arabs, and one for the Sunni Kurds.

You can’t hear us, obviously, but we can tell you that the sigh we just exhaled was both deep and deeply pained.

Worse than Biden’s presence in Baghdad, the White House appears to be underplaying this story. It may be doing so for public relations purposes. Or it may be doing so because it really doesn’t understand what’s at stake. Either way, we’re not reassured. *The Washington Post’s* editorial board does a far better job than the White House of explaining the issue and the danger. To wit:

Iraq’s march toward a crucial national election has had the feel of a cheap carnival ride, with sickening plunges and barely averted derailments at every turn. Now a new twist poses the most serious threat yet to the prospect of a free and fair election -- and a successful wind-down of the U.S. mission. Seemingly out of nowhere last week an obscure and opaque commission ruled

that more than 500 candidates would be disqualified from the parliamentary vote -- in most cases on the grounds that they once supported the Baath party of Saddam Hussein.

Among those proscribed are top Sunni leaders, including the serving defense minister and the head of a major political bloc. If the bans stand, an election that looked as though it would be one of the most free in the history of the Arab world would be badly degraded. At worst, the sectarian warfare that nearly tore Iraq apart could reignite.

This last worry, the fear of the reemergence of sectarian violence, is what has us spooked – and for good reason, it would seem. According to a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report on the election ban, this “reemergence” is possibly already underway:

In the central province of Najaf today, local officials warned Saddam loyalists to move out within 24 hours or face an “iron fist,” according to AFP.

The news agency cited a statement in which the officials said: “The Ba’ath gang of Saddam has one day to leave the province or we will use an iron fist against those who have failed to distance themselves from the Ba’ath and Al-Qaeda.”

Ba’athists have been accused carrying out a deadly triple bomb attack in Najaf Province last week.

“The council’s next measure will be to purge local government institutions of Ba’athists,” the statement said.

Yesterday morning, as you know, Baghdad was rocked again by a series of bombings, as *The Wall Street Journal* noted:

A series of bombings targeting three hotels rocked the capital Monday afternoon, in the latest large-scale attacks ahead of parliamentary elections.

The Ministry of Interior said late Monday evening that 36 people were killed and 71 injured. The death toll could climb as rescue operations continued into the night.

The first of the blasts detonated around 3:30 p.m., and two subsequent attacks followed over the next half hour. They shook a large swath of central Baghdad bordering the Tigris River.

Monday’s attacks are the latest in a series of coordinated bombings that have rattled the city ahead of March elections. Blasts in August, October and December targeting high-profile institutions, including prominent government ministries and offices, have killed hundreds.

Now, we don’t want to get all hysterical at the idea of bombings in Iraq. Iraq is an unstable place and will be for a long time, whether American troops are there or not. And nothing was more tiresome than the ceaseless bleats from the far left and far right about the “failure” of the Surge strategy every time a bomb went off. Bombs don’t necessarily equal strategic failure.

At the same time, we do worry about the Obama administration, which seems both desperate to focus on domestic rather than foreign policy and equally desperate to focus its limited foreign policy energy on Afghanistan rather than Iraq. Obama wants Iraq not to exist. He wants to pretend that it’s not a problem and is certainly not *his* problem. But that’s not going to work. It is his problem. And, moreover, it could be, in part, his success.

But in order for that to happen, he would have to pay at least fleeting attention to the problems there and express at least a passing inclination to keep American troops in country if the security situation deteriorates.

The American military, General David Petraeus, President George W. Bush, and even the tepidly approving American people have won a great and unanticipated victory in Iraq. By doing precisely what he harps on his predecessor for doing, taking his eye off the ball, Barack Obama threatens to give that victory back.

And that would be a disaster for everyone – Sunni, Shiite, and American. We'll see.

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