

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

Weber's most notable contribution, however, lay in identifying the importance of bureaucracy to modern politics. His definition of bureaucracy, not as a type of political system, but as a continuous, professionalized, and rule-governed form of administration, showed it to be increasingly prevalent – thanks to its being uniquely equipped to handle increasingly various and complex organizational tasks – in all spheres of modern life.

On the basis of his analysis he demonstrated that the socialist ideal of a society without domination was utopian, and predicted that the replacement of the capitalist entrepreneur by the state administrator would create a monolithic power structure as oppressive as that of ancient Egypt and as economically stagnant as that of late imperial Rome.

In Weber's view, the key concern about bureaucracy was not that it be replaced but that it be checked, on the one hand, within a framework of mutually limiting power structures and, on the other, by ensuring that bureaucratic organizations were themselves subordinate to the control of individual leaders selected on the basis of nonbureaucratic principles and acting under such principles.

The Oxford Companion to the Politics of the World, 1993.

THE COMPETENCE SHTICK.

The general consensus on the political right is that the Gulf of Mexico/BP oil spill has been particularly damaging for President Obama and for Democrats in general, largely because it hits them in the one place where they appeared to have had an advantage over Bush, McCain, and the rest of the Republicans, namely their competence. No longer. If the spill has done nothing else, it has made Obama et al. look foolish, disconnected, affected, and powerless. In her *Wall Street Journal* column last week, Peggy Noonan laid out the case against President Obama:

I wonder if the president knows what a disaster this is not only for him but for his political assumptions. His philosophy is that it is appropriate for the federal government to occupy a more burly, significant and powerful place in America—confronting its problems of need, injustice, inequality. But in a way, and inevitably, this is always boiled down to a promise: “Trust us here in Washington, we will prove worthy of your trust.” Then the oil spill came and government could not do the job, could not meet the need, in fact seemed faraway and incapable: “We pay so much for the government and it can't cap an undersea oil well!”

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This is what happened with Katrina, and Katrina did at least two big things politically. The first was draw together everything people didn't like about the Bush administration, everything it didn't like about two wars and high spending and illegal immigration, and brought those strands into a heavy knot that just sat there, soggy, and came to symbolize Bushism. The second was to illustrate that even though the federal government in our time has continually taken on new missions and responsibilities, the more it took on, the less it seemed capable of performing even its most essential jobs. Conservatives got this point—they know it without being told—but liberals and progressives did not. They thought Katrina was the result only of George W. Bush's incompetence and conservatives' failure to "believe in government." But Mr. Obama was supposed to be competent.

The inimitable Michael Barone, writing two days after Ms. Noonan, made a similar case against the President, but expanded the argument, suggesting that Obama's apparent incompetence had tarnished not only his own reputation but that of his co-ideologues as well, namely the people he calls "Obama Democrats." "The oil spill puts Obama's reputation for competence in doubt," Barone noted, "while the public opinion polls make it clear his ideology is being rejected much more emphatically than George W. Bush's ever was." This, he concluded, spells big trouble for "Obama Democrats" in the next two elections, having lost the only angle they had, namely the appeal to "competence over ideology."

This is all well and good, we think. And we agree wholeheartedly with both analyses. Obama looks incompetent and so do his fellow partisans. But there's more to it than just that. What these two writers – and the others who have written similar thoughts – are actually describing is not merely the collapse of the Obama administration or of the Democratic Party as it is currently constituted, but the collapse of the bureaucratic state and its enablers as well.

When Noonan writes about Obama's failing philosophy, or when Barone writes about the rejection of the Obama ideology, the subject under consideration by both is the belief that government can and should be bigger, and that if it is, it will be better; the belief that "professional" and pragmatic administration of the nation's ills is what is necessary and that the right men and women in the right positions can harness the power of the state to administer to the people's needs far more effectively than can the people themselves in conjunction with their duly elected representatives.

We should note that Peggy Noonan is a convert to the anti-Obama crowd, having once bought into the belief that he was a positive pragmatist who could get things done and "govern" effectively. And she was hardly alone. A great many conservatives supported Obama because of this "competence" shtick; this belief that he could get things done because he is smarter than the rest of us. Heck, David Brooks, the resident sorta-conservative at *The New York Times*, still believes it. As he wrote just a few weeks ago:

I confess that about 16 months ago I had some hope of a revival. The culture war, which had bitterly divided the country for decades, was winding down. The war war — the fight over Iraq and national security — was also waning.

The country had just elected a man who vowed to move past the old polarities, who valued discussion and who clearly had some sympathy with both the Burkean and Hamiltonian impulses. He staffed his administration with brilliant pragmatists whose views overlapped with mine, who differed only in that they have more faith in technocratic planning.

Obama is smart, you see, and he surrounded himself with other smarties, who will help him to solve the world's problems. Brooks continued, noting that "Yet things have not worked out for those of us in the broad middle." Really? Ya think? Things haven't worked out? Brooks blames "history." If he had any sense and any understanding of what is happening in and to the Obama administration, he'd be blaming

himself and his foolish preoccupation with the “smart guys” running the government.

As regular readers know, we have written a great deal about bureaucracy and the administrative state over the years. Neither political party has a monopoly on the belief that a government staffed by smart professionals is inherently superior to the will of the people. Both have repeatedly expanded the size and scope of government, and both have repeatedly insisted that the administrative state is the best chance the nation has for rational governance.

And to tell the truth, both parties base that claim in part on certain realities of the modern world, in which the specialization of knowledge necessitates a highly educated, highly skilled, highly compartmentalized institution to process and assess information. Unfortunately, both have abused the concept, presuming its flawlessness, and both have therefore over-invested in the idea that the state can and should compensate for all of failings of the marketplace.

This is both foolish and dangerous.

Foolish, you say? How can that be so? Well, in order to invest so heavily in the administrative state, one must also invest heavily in the bureaucracy that would direct the state. Even if you ignore the manifest incompetence of political hacks like Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and the ethical shortcomings of other “technocrats” like Secretary of the Treasury TurboTax Tim Geithner, you’re left counting on those who staff the various agencies to behave professionally and competently. And how is that likely to work out? Well, given the track record of the agency in the public spotlight these days as a result of the Gulf oil spill, we’d guess “not well.” As the *Associated Press* reported last week:

Staff members at an agency that oversees offshore drilling accepted tickets to sports events, lunches and other gifts from oil and gas companies and used government computers to view pornography, according to an Interior Department report alleging a culture of cronyism between regulators and the industry.

In at least one case, an inspector for the Minerals Management Service admitted using crystal methamphetamine and said he might have been under the influence of the drug the next day at work, according to the report by the acting inspector general of the Interior Department.

The report cites a variety of violations of federal regulations and ethics rules at the agency’s Louisiana office.

Porn, bribery, and drugs. Yay for bureaucracy, we say!

This, of course, is anything but unusual. In spite of their necessity and their obvious utility, bureaucracies fail. And they fail all the time. And so do the bureaucrats who staff them.

As for the “dangerous” part of our admonition, we think that that might best be summed up by another *New York Times* columnist, Thomas Friedman, who, like David Brooks is an Obama fan and a big believer in the efficacy of bureaucratic assertiveness. And here is what Friedman had to say last weekend on Meet the Press:

I have fantasized—don’t get me wrong—but that what if we could just be China for a day? I mean, just, just, just one day. You know, I mean, where we could actually, you know, authorize the right solutions, and I do think there is a sense of that, on, on everything from the economy to environment. I don’t want to be China for a second, OK, I want my democracy to work with the same authority, focus and stick-to-itiveness. But right now we have a system that can only produce suboptimal solutions.

Pardon us, but YIKES! Friedman not only presumes that the “right” solutions exist but that a state could implement them in contravention of the will of the people, for their own good, apparently without the messiness of coercion. This is nuts.

Friedman, of course, has a long history of . . . ummm . . . “pistol envy” when it comes to the Chinese. They can get things done, you see, because they don’t have to worry about the stupid people and their stupid beliefs and their stupid elections. What Friedman doesn’t seem to care to discuss though, is that those who disagree with the “right” solutions, as determined by the state, tend to end up dead.

Again, Friedman is not alone. Envy of the ease with which autocracies are able to force their will on the people is rather consistent among statist and especially statist on the political left. As law professor and blogress Ann Althouse put it, “A love of autocracy often lurks beneath the liberal veneer. There’s this idea that the right answers are known and the people are just too deluded and distorted to see what they are and to vote for them.”

The biggest flaw in the would-be autocrats’ fantasies is the simple fact that the “right” solutions are quite often not right at all. You see, when Friedman talks about everything from the “economy to the environment” he is talking about Keynesianism and global warmism. And if the 15 months of the Obama presidency have shown us anything, it’s that the solutions described and proscribed by Washington’s smart guys regarding Keynesian stimulus and global warming hysteria have been miserable failures, which is to say that the smart guys are maybe not so smart after all. If they were, then unemployment wouldn’t be at 10% and the global warming researchers wouldn’t have had to make up their data and suppress conflicting viewpoints.

The other problem, of course, is as we noted above, that Lord Acton was right in that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Big government leads to big power. And big power leads to big corruption. That’s the way it works. That’s human nature. And the presumption that it could be otherwise is both arrogant and ignorant.

Exactly a month ago, when the oil spill first started to affect President Obama and the public’s perception of him, we wrote the following:

The inevitable consequence of bigger and more intrusive government that promises to be everything to everyone

is the quite natural expectation that government will actually be everything to everyone. The president morphs from being the head of the executive branch of the federal government into the national Superman, expected to be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound and save small children from everything from toxic Chinese choo-choo trains to undercooked hamburgers. Why then can’t he save the Gulf Coast from an oil spill? That’s what Superman would do, after all.

Nearly five decades ago, when the great Theodore Lowi wrote his landmark treatise on American government, *The End of Liberalism*, one of his principle concerns with the rise of interest-group democracy was the manner in which it would distort the electorate’s expectations of government. We’re not entirely sure that this is what he had in mind, but *voila*. Expectations are certainly distorted. And the consequences for democratic governance are too weighty even to contemplate.

The expectation of government omnipotence and presidential omniscience has created a universe of monstrously perverse incentives.

Obama and his fellow partisans are suffering the consequences of these perverse incentives now. And rightly so, since they are the principle source of the people’s inflated and entirely unrealistic expectations.

What is truly troubling about this, though, is the fact that those who are rightly noting Obama’s loss of public trust with regard to “competence” are thus far falling short of indicting his entire world view, which presumes the infallibility of the professional bureaucracy as well.

If Obama, the Democratic Congress, and the rest of the political class are, as Peggy Noonan and Michael Barone predict, rendered impotent by this disaster and their reaction to it, the country will, by necessity, be

compelled to lean more heavily on those governmental institutions that are removed from politics, namely the professional bureaucracy. And that bureaucracy is, in many ways, equally impotent in the face of the same troubles.

The administrative state has its value and can, under certain circumstances be incredibly helpful. But it has its limitations. Would that the ruling elites knew and understood this.

“DAS TOTENSCHIFF”

Well, clearly the big story of the week, and maybe even of the month, or the year, is the “storming” over the weekend of the “peaceful” humanitarian aid ship, the Mavi Marmara, by Israeli commandos, who proceeded to kill perhaps as many as 19 of the “activists” on board.

The global community is, naturally, unhappy about the incident and, even more naturally, is blaming the damned, dirty J . . . errr . . . Israelis for the deaths of so many “innocents.” The French are stomping their feet, demanding an explanation, attacking the Israeli embassy. The Greeks are rioting as well, which was accomplished easily enough, given that they had rioters in the streets already. The Turks are menacingly threatening “consequences.” And the world’s most “esteemed” body, the United Nations Security Council has been called upon to mete out justice – to the Israelis, of course, facts be damned.

Now, on the off chance that our irritating use of scare quotes above didn’t tip you off, we will state for the record that this story is garbage, both in its telling and in the import attributed to it.

In other words, do not be fooled, gentle reader, by the breathless reports and the damning and agitated news stories. This “big” story is no story at all. It is nothing, or at least it’s nothing about which anyone should be surprised. It is, unhappily, the expected; the predictable; the typical – which is to say that it is anything but “news.” It is, as we said, garbage.

Now, that’s not to say that there will be no repercussions from the raid and from the lamentable loss of life. No doubt there will be. But the *real*

story simply did not happen this past weekend. Indeed, it hasn’t happened at all yet, though it soon will. And we, for two, fear *that* story. And we fear its ramifications.

Let us explain.

Anyone who was even remotely surprised by the events this weekend surrounding the Mavi Marmara simply hasn’t been paying attention. The “attack” by the Israeli commandoes and the subsequent loss of life were almost certainly what the ship’s outfitters had in mind all along. “Suicide by Israeli commando,” you could call it.

Don’t believe us? Well, you don’t have to take our word for it. You could, for example, take the word of Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas “prime minister” of Gaza, who last week predicted that the peace flotilla would bring “victory” to Gaza no matter how events played out. “If the ships reach Gaza, it’s a victory for Gaza,” he told supporters, and “if they are intercepted and terrorized by the Zionists, it will be a victory for Gaza, too . . .” Wow. Is that guy prophetic or what? It’s almost as if it were all planned in advance.

Additionally, you could take the word of the men on board the ship, who can be seen on various videos, chanting about “death to Jews” and specifically citing “Khaibar,” (the site of a seventh century battle between Mohammed and a tribe of Jews) and promising the that “Mohammed’s army will return.”

And as for that ship, the Mavi Marmara, and the chanters on board, it is instructive, we believe, to note here who provided the ship to the flotilla and what their past behavior might have suggested about their intentions regarding the blockade of Gaza. In this effort, Jonathan Schanzer, a former terrorism finance analyst at the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, proves invaluable. To wit:

The organizers belong to a nonprofit that was banned by the Israeli government in July 2008 for its ties to terrorism finance.

The Turkish IHH (*İslan Haklary Ve Hurriyetleri Vakfi* in Turkish) was founded in 1992, and reportedly popped up on the CIA's radar in 1996 for its radical Islamist leanings. Like many other Islamist charities, the IHH has a record of providing relief to areas where disaster has struck in the Muslim world . . .

The Turkish nonprofit belongs to a Saudi-based umbrella organization known to finance terrorism called the Union of Good (Ittilaf al-Kheir in Arabic). Notably, the Union is chaired by Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, who is known best for his religious ruling that encourages suicide attacks against Israeli civilians. According to one report, Qardawi personally transferred millions of dollars to the Union in an effort to provide financial support to Hamas.

In 2008, the Israelis banned IHH, along with 35 other Islamist charities worldwide, for its ties to the Union of Good. This was a follow-on designation; Israelis first blocked the Union of Good from operating in the West Bank and Gaza in 2002 . . .

The U.S. government, it should be noted, also views the Union of Good as a terrorist organization. On November 12, 2008, a press release from the U.S. Treasury announced the umbrella group's leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT), stating that the group was "created by Hamas leadership to transfer funds to the terrorist organization."

So why is anyone surprised by this? The "activists" aboard the Mavi Marmara went looking for a fight, quite possible with the blessing of the Turkish government, which is currently trying its damndest to challenge the Persians for the leadership role among non-Arab Islamists. And they got the fight they sought. Who didn't know?

Of course, if the Islamist activists behaved predictably, then we'll need to invent a new word to describe how both the Israeli government and the global community reacted to their provocations. Uber-predictably, maybe?

As has been their wont of late, the Israelis reacted justifiably, honorably, half-assedly, and, at the same time, ham-handedly. If some of these adjectives appear contradictory, well, that just points up the true beauty of the modern Israeli approach to its enemies.

The Israelis, you see, want the world to like them. And who can blame them? And so they try to play by the global community's blinkered and biased rules. They try to play nice. They attack, for example, wielding paint-ball guns.

Unfortunately, their enemies are bound by no such limitations on their behavior, and they obey no such limitations on their behavior. They can and do kidnap, steal, behead, and slaughter, all without eliciting even the slightest hint of rebuke from the global arbiters of national morality. Israel's enemies are always the victim, as it turns out, which is to say that the Israelis' attempts at delicacy are not only tactically foolish, but strategically foolish as well, since they earn the Jewish state nothing by way of sympathy or amity yet leave its soldiers exposed to greater danger than necessary.

In the end, the attempt to avoid any casualties and to play nice costs the Israelis far more than it was intended to save. And this happens over and over again. As Friend-of-The-Political-Forum Daniel Pipes noted yesterday:

Israel's command structure, having mastered the old ways of war (the ones that lasted to 1973), has shown utter strategic incompetence at the new ways of war (in place since 1982). The new rules require an agile sense of public relations, which means that a powerful state never physically harms, even inadvertently, its rag-tag political adversaries.

Rachel Corrie has been an albatross around Israel's neck since 2003; today's dead on the seas off Gaza will prove

an even worse source of anti-Zionism. Thus did the “armada of hate and violence” achieve its purpose.

As for the global community, it too played its part, beautifully and right on cue. After all, what would an incident in the Middle East be without the calls for investigation, the assessment of blame, the insistence on repercussions – all targeting Israel, and all issued before any of the facts are available? If shots are fired, blame the Jews. How could it be any simpler? And if the facts contradict the initial screams and shrieks of horror, that’s OK. “Disproportionate force” is a solid fallback position.

The poor activists had only sharpened metal clubs and knives, but the Israelis had guns! Never mind that they were paint-ball guns initially. That’s beside the point. All that really matters is that the Israelis are to blame; the goldarned Jews did it again. Which is convenient, of course, since the righteously indignant politicians in the global capitals – from Paris to Brussels, from Ankara to Tehran – already have the form letter written and can just poke the send button on the email. Been there; done that. Talk about predictable.

The only reaction in this whole episode that is not predictable, which is to say that the only aspect of this story that might constitute actual news, is the ultimate reaction of the American administration to Israel’s conundrum and to the public calls for castigation. The final disposition of this incident – whether it goes down as one of many regrettable losses of life in the Middle East or as something significantly more important – hinges almost entirely on the course that President Obama and his advisers choose to plot over the next several days and weeks. And as of right now, no one can say with any degree of certainty what that course might be.

At any previous point over the last decade or so – and probably over the last six decades – the American response would have been predictable as well, i.e. a little scolding, a little harder push with regard to the peace process, and absolute defiance against the rest of the world’s attempts to punish Israel. Today, there is no guarantee that the American government will hold firm. Indeed, there is no guarantee that it even wants to.

We have written endlessly over the past few months about the rising tide of global anti-Semitism, the causes and likely consequences of that anti-Semitism, and of the Obama administration’s perhaps unwitting contribution to that anti-Semitism. And so we won’t bore you again with the details, except to remind you of what we wrote in the April 6 issue of this newsletter:

We really have no idea what Obama believes in the depths of his heart, despite the fact that he’s written two autobiographies. If we were to guess, we’d say that he is not anti-Semitic, in the traditional sense of the term. He is friendly to Jews, socializes with them, and trusts virtually the entirety of his presidency to one, Rahm Emanuel. It would be hard to imagine Obama (or anyone else for that matter) placing that much faith in the son of a member of the Irgun if he truly hated Jews.

At the same time, Obama is precisely the sort of preening, post-Western intellectual wannabe who is liable to buy the “Israel as oppressor” meme and to allow his *au courant* hatred for the West and for Western traditionalism to color his perception of Israel. The people whom Obama befriended in Chicago – from the Reverend Wright to the academic professional-Palestinian-grievance-monger Rashid Khalidi – are strong believers in Israel’s near-universal culpability. His foreign policy advisors are post-Western Arabists. His appointees have engaged in Israel-bashing. The guy is steeped in anti-Western, post-modern education and has surrounded himself with those who either are overt anti-Semites or do a pretty good imitation of them.

In other words, Barack Obama and his administration’s policy toward Israel are the inevitable outcome of the oft-repeated lies of the last decade. The left insisted that the Jews were pulling

strings, that the “neocons” had dual loyalties, and that Israel was meddling in American affairs. And like the apocryphal schoolboy who is told so often that he is dumb that he comes to believe it, the most liberal administration in American history has heard so often about the Jews’ treachery that it too has come to believe it.

Throughout his presidency, Obama has treated Israel with disdain.

Late last week, Obama added to his reputation for placing the United States’ traditional friendship with Israel at the bottom of the list of his priorities. As you may have read, the United States was one of 189 countries that agreed, last Friday, to a new document that updates the Nuclear non-proliferation treaty. That document, predictably, singles out Israel for its unwillingness to sign the NPT and for its refusal to allow international inspections of its nuclear capabilities.

As countless commentators have noted, this was a huge diplomatic victory for Egypt and an equally huge defeat for Israel. The last time that there was an effort to amend NPT to single-out Israel, in 2005, the Bush administration refused to accept any such language. This time, however, the outcome was pre-ordained. As Yossi Melman put it in a column for *Haaretz*, “The U.S. preferred its overall interest in advancing the idea of limiting nuclear weapons throughout the world, tighter inspections of nuclear installations and the spread of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, over supporting Israel’s needs.”

Does that mean that the Obama administration will again seek to advance its own personal agenda at the expense of Israel when it is forced to decide whether to condemn the actions this weekend on the Mavi Marmara? Of course not. But one could certainly understand why the Israelis might be concerned. No one has any idea what Obama will do or how far he will go with regard to sacrificing Israel on the altar of his own personal predilections and self-interest.

What we do know, though, is that any suggestion by the United States that it is no longer willing to stand by Israel in such circumstances and is therefore willing to put the interests of the “global community” above those of an ally will ultimately bring the world closer to war. As things stand today, the only thing that has prevented the Israelis from handling their latest existential crisis – the Iranian nuclear bomb – themselves is the belief that the most powerful nation in the world will, at some point, come to its aid and prevent its annihilation. But if that calculus changes because of concern about the leadership of the most powerful nation in the world and its dedication to the righteousness of the Jewish state’s survival, all bets are off.

After the incident on the Mavi Marmara, Daniel Drezner, a foreign policy author and blogger, suggested that Israel’s diplomatic position is swiftly coming to resemble that of North Korea, i.e. an isolated and frightened nation with only one real ally. There is some truth in this analogy, we suppose. But it is also misleading.

Unlike North Korea, Israel is merely struggling for its survival against geographic, historical, and prejudicial trends that threaten it simply because of its ethnic makeup. More to the point, we suppose, the other difference is that North Korea can all but certainly count on its ally, China, to continue to shield it. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for certain about Israel. When it can be said for certain, then and only then, will the Mavi Marmara story be “news.”

With all of that said, let us now close with an observation that we have made over and over again in these pages for well over two decades, namely that regardless of how one feels about Israel and its right to exist, the fact of the matter is that a peaceful Middle East is in America’s best interests, and there is nothing more threatening to peace in the Middle East than a weak Israel.

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