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THEY SAID IT

From top to bottom we are obsessed with the political – as discussion, as action, as policy, or as solution. There is nothing in the present situation that is not assigned a dominant political value or given a distinct political identity. The economic problem, the philosophical problem, the religious problem are absorbed by the political problems. We avoid diverting our attention from the exclusively political. . . This is what we have come to, so sadly and swiftly, in these last years of the twentieth century; that we have made the political element the exclusive nexus of cause and effect; that political agendas now shape the new morality and the new saviors; that the exclusiveness of the political overrules all other considerations and principles of action and understanding; that the final arbiters of opinion are the political exclusivists who have no special affection for or loyalty to first principles or for wisdom and prudence; who, in short, furiously worship at the altar of special ideologies.

George A. Panichas, “Modern Age,” Fall, 1995.

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THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL. AND THE POLITICAL IS TIRESOME.

The left in the United States has a preoccupation. And, as a result, the political party that represents the left in this country – the Democratic Party –has a very serious problem that threatens not only the nation’s relations with arguably its two most important allies in the world, but also the party itself as it is currently constituted.

Strangely, given that the very term “the left” applies to politics and political ideology, the left’s problem is politics – or, more specifically, its obsession with politics. As the feminists insisted in the early 1960s and as the left in general came to believe later that decade, “the personal is political,” which is to say that everything is political and everything must be treated as a political issue and a struggle between various competing political factions. Or, as we put it in these pages just over four years ago:

One’s value, one’s contribution, one’s morality is tied up in politics, meaning that political disagreements are not mere disagreements, but personal affronts and moral abominations. Differences in opinion over policy issues – taxes, foreign affairs, environmental regulation – become much more to those on the left, providing them a gauge of moral worth.

The effects of this belief on both the nation in general and the left in specific are far too great and too important to document in their entirety in the time and space available to us in this limited format. Still, aspects of this fixation on politics and belief in the universality of political motives can and do affect the day-

to-day struggles of American life and, by extension, the direction of the nation, including its geopolitical future, its economic future, and most relevantly for you, the disposition of its financial markets.

One such aspect that resonates appreciably today is the belief that there is no event and occurrence that exists outside of the realm of politics. All incidents of any sort have relevant precursors that affect the eventual outcome, and all precursors are political in nature. Nothing, you see, can be merely an act of God. Nothing can be a simple accident. Nothing happens...just because. Everything happens for a reason, and that reason is political.

We saw the effects of this belief, of course, on a grand stage in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It wasn't just that a hurricane hit the Gulf Coast. It wasn't just that one of the cities hit hardest happened to be a soup bowl, sitting below sea level with an archaic and confusing system of levees and other fortifications. It wasn't just that that city happened to be predominantly black.

No, it was George Bush's fault. And it was evidence of enduring racism. And it was proof that conservatism was not just malevolent and dangerous, but also bred governmental incompetence, perhaps intentionally. The hip-hop artist Kanye West declared that Katrina was proof that George Bush didn't like black people. And the left, silently, slowly nodded its collective head in agreement.

Unfortunately for Democrats, we are seeing the effects of this political obsession again today and again in the Gulf, only this time with one of their own in charge.

Several weeks ago, when the Gulf oil spill first became news, we argued that the one of the biggest problems that Obama faces with regard to this issue is his inability to meet the ridiculously high expectations that he set for himself. Even King Canute understood that he couldn't control the tides, but Barack Obama – the man who recognized his own nomination as the

moment that the planet would begin to heal and the seas would cease to rise – knows no such humility. He has promised so much and yet can deliver so little.

Naturally, all of this puts Obama in a tough predicament. Political blame needs to be dispensed, but he cannot take any of it, despite his public avowals to do so. And so he is doing what he has always done: he's blaming Bush.

The "previous administration," you see allowed things to get so totally out of control. They relaxed regulations. They pampered the oil companies and ignored their flouting of safety standards. They winked at misbehavior. This is *their* fault.

To make the point even more indelible, the left has hinted at connections to – gasp!! – Dick Cheney, the most dastardly man ever to set foot in the Oval Office. Halliburton has emerged as a key player in this drama, and despite the fact that Cheney has been gone from Halliburton for twice as long as he was there, it's still his baby, according to the left. The PR firm employing a onetime Cheney aide took on the role of BP's American spokesperson, which of course, means that Cheney is deeply involved in trying to help BP escape the aftermath. This isn't Obama's Katrina, the left-leaning new media mumbles. It's Cheney's! The damned dirty oilman has struck again!

This is all well and good, of course, as far as political theater goes. But that's all it is, theater. The actual case against the Bush administration is not only absurdly thin, but ignores the simple, basic fact that Bush didn't cause the spill and, moreover, that it occurred more than a year after he had left town. The case against Cheney specifically is even more transparent. The only thing that would have made it a better, more suitable political witch hunt would have been the inclusion of Donald Rumsfeld in the narrative. Maybe the spill was caused when the men on the Deepwater Horizon went nuts because an overdose of Nutrasweet?

(Nutrasweet, for the record, is the brand name for the artificial sweetener Aspartame, developed by G.D. Searle. And Rumsfeld, of course, was CEO of Searle from 1977 to 1985.)

Fortunately, the Obama team is very bad at selling its theatrics and is selling them to a public that is not particularly receptive. Perhaps Bill Clinton could have pulled this off, but Obama is – in sooooo many ways – not Bill Clinton. And he looks foolish. And whiny. For crying out loud, blaming Bush was, in some instances understandable – *a year ago*. But still to be blaming him is pathetic. And the public knows it. Somehow, the old British term “big girl’s blouse” keeps coming to mind.

And speaking of Britain, Obama’s other villain of choice in this mess is, naturally enough, British Petroleum. This is perfectly fair, given that this is BP’s rig and BP’s spill. But again, Obama and his team have no sense of what they are doing, how far they should push things, or what the ramifications of their reversion to political theater might be. And they are hurting their own cause, as well as their country’s, with their theatrics.

According to British media sources, a great many people in the UK are incredibly unhappy about the treatment Obama is giving BP and the effect that it is having on the company, despite its clear culpability for the spill. *The New York Post’s* Kyle Smith spells out the particulars:

President Obama’s drill-sergeant policy toward BP — yell more, maybe they’ll shoot straighter — has started to annoy British writers who say Obama’s attacks on BP do more harm than good.

“This crisis has injected an animus into transatlantic relations unseen since the days of George III,” said *Telegraph* columnist (and former BP exec) George Trefgarne.

Daily Mail columnist Stephen Glover said Obama harbored “anti-British prejudice” dating all the way back to Obama’s allegation in “Dreams from My Father” that his grandfather was tortured by the British army during the Mau-Mau uprising in Kenya.

Obama “resembles a judge who, having sentenced a penitent offender, demands again and again that he be brought up from the cells to receive another dressing down for the same crime,” wrote Glover, adding, “It is pretty clear that Mr. Obama does not much like anything that is British.” . . .

BP has said from the beginning that it will bear the cost of the Gulf spill. It will also face huge civil suits. Obama doesn’t need to act in order for BP to be punished.

Nevertheless, to make the boss look like he’s in charge, his administration keeps threatening BP with thuggish language (“We will keep our boot on their neck”) and made public a criminal probe — something the Justice Department doesn’t normally do until it actually files charges . . .

Why announce a criminal case that may result in no charges, or minor ones? Holder’s little hissy fit helped knock \$18 billion off the market value of BP stock. (Exxon spent \$4.3 billion on the Valdez cleanup and litigation.) Holder also spooked other oil stocks, which dragged down the Dow Jones average with them.

Even if you think being buried headfirst in an oil well is too good for BP execs, every time Obama lashes out at them, he’s knocking down innocents. BP is Britain’s largest company and the biggest

holding in most British pension funds. About one-seventh of all the dividends paid out in the British equivalent of the Dow, the FTSE 100, came from BP.

Britain shmitten. We have political blame to apportion here, people! And since the President can't take the hit himself, someone else is going to have to. And if that someone else is a British pensioner, well, tough dookies. The "party of the people" has priorities, you know, and chief among those priorities is ensuring that someone else, someone evil and dastardly looking, is not simply blamed, but thoroughly demonized. BP and its executives are no mere men. They are monsters!

None of this should come as a surprise to anyone, of course. The left has grown accustomed to turning political opponents into monsters and has had a great deal of practice at it lately. Bush is a monster. Cheney is a monster. "Big Bankers" are monsters. Wall Street big shots are monsters. Health insurance companies are monsters. Tea partiers are monsters. Arizonans are monsters. *Etc. etc. ad nauseam.*

What concerns us most here is that this political blame-game is having some very serious real world effects. Domestically, Obama et al. wonder why unemployment remains so high and why employers are hesitant about adding jobs. Would you add jobs, invest your capital, devote your life to an enterprise that could, at any moment and on any political whim, become the next to be demonized? Do you?

More broadly and globally speaking, Britain is not the first American ally to be touched and to be riled by the left's insistence on seeing every action and event through a narrow political lens. Just last week (and in dozens of other weeks before), we noted the ridiculousness and the destructiveness of the left's political blame war against Israel. They call it an "apartheid" state and the cause of the Middle East woes. Their media doyens suggest that all would be well in the region if only the damnable Jews would "get the hell out of Palestine!"

The left – with the Obama administration in the lead – has decided that it is acceptable and perhaps even beneficial to call out, deride, and manifestly damage the relationships that exist between this nation and its two most steadfast allies. *And that's just in the last two weeks.*

The world, as you may have noticed, is a brutal, ugly place. And it's getting more brutal and uglier every day. Meanwhile, our president looks for someone to blame, never caring, apparently, about the ultimate consequences of his tired, tiresome game. Years ago Wall Street worried that government would socialize businesses and then ruin them. It never occurred to anyone back then that government would ruin the businesses before socializing them. But then, times change.

ONE CHEER AND MUCH FEAR.

One cheer for Barack Obama, we say! Hooray!

In case you hadn't noticed (and we'll guess that you hadn't) Obama has – behind a smokescreen of broken promises, empty rhetoric, and patent incompetence – managed, very carefully and very quietly, to keep one of his most essential campaign pledges. While no one was looking, it seems, "the one" found a way to bring a handful of formerly close allies back into the American fold. Bush alienated them; Obama brought them back. So hooray, say we! Hooray!

Why only one cheer and not the customary three, you ask? Well, that's the catch. The devil, as they say, is in the details. And while Obama may, broadly speaking, have brought some erstwhile, wayward allies back home, we doubt seriously that he intended to do so. The details of this new pro-Americanism, you see, are kinda ugly. For those of you scoring along at home: we took away one cheer because Obama's success was accidental; and we took away another because that accidental "success" is indicative of broader and more serious global problems that Obama himself had a hand in hastening and amplifying, if not actually inciting.

Let us explain.

During the “lost decade” of Bush/Cheney, a handful of longstanding American allies began to think seriously about altering their allegiances or, at the very least, about cutting themselves free from the tether that bound them to the big, clumsy, no-longer-necessary American hyperpower.

Throughout the Middle East, for example, countries once grateful to the United States for, say, forcing Saddam out of Kuwait and back behind his own borders, were suddenly upset with their one-time benefactors for “waging war” on Islam. The “war on terror” was ungainly. And it was Bush’s doing.

As it turns out, Bush also forced an evolution in American relations with the nations of East Asia; and it was not a pleasant evolution. The Japanese wanted the American Marines out, after 65 years. And all the South Koreans wanted was a little “Sunshine” with the North, a little rapprochement. What they got instead was American anger, venom, and obsession over Lil’ Kim and his nuclear weapons. How was that supposed to help things? Who needs it, right?

Well, as it turns out, they do. They all do.

You see, when Barack became president, one thing that he actually did do was to place considerably greater emphasis on talk over action, i.e. “diplomacy” over engagement. He dialed back the aggressive rhetoric from Washington and dialed up the willingness to compromise with and defer to the nation’s purported enemies. He hit the “reset button” with Russia. He reached out to Mad Mahmoud in Iran. He huddled with Chavez in Venezuela and laughed with the re-emergent Ortega in Nicaragua. Heck, he even sided with Chavez and Ortega against the people of Honduras. In short, the guy went on a metaphorical friendship tour to make sure that everyone knew that the bad old days were over and that a new, kinder, gentler United States would be far less willing to enforce its will around the globe.

And how did that work out? Well, as you know, the Iranians have continued their work on nuclear weapons, laughing in the face of inspections and

United Nations sanctions. Last week, the International Atomic Energy Agency – the UN’s watchdog and formerly the party least likely to accuse the Iranians of wrongdoing – reported that the Iranians now have over two tons of enriched uranium, which is enough for two nuclear bombs.

Meanwhile, Iran has done the opposite of Obama, and has dialed up its antagonistic rhetoric, promising that any new sanctions against it will force a confrontation with the West. It continues openly and unapologetically to threaten Israel’s existence and even went so far this week as to stick its nose into the Gaza-blockade debacle, offering to escort any “peace protest” ships trying to break Israel’s will as well as its naval cordon.

And speaking of the Gaza blockade, in addition to Iran, Turkey has seized upon the new, gentler American posture to insert itself into the battle for leadership of the Islamist world. Once upon a time, the Turks sought entry into the EU and the monetary union. Today, they are a NATO member trying desperately to start a war – or a skirmish at least – with America’s staunchest Middle Eastern ally, all in an attempt to prove its Islamist *bona fides*.

In Asia, the North Koreans are doing their damndest to start an actual war and may well be unhappy that they have been unable to do so yet. The sinking of the South Korean Navy ship *Cheonan* and the deaths of 46 South Korean sailors was an actual, real life act of war that has nonetheless resulted in no real life consequences for the North. Lil’ Kim also continues to export nuclear technology to the world’s rogue nations, most recently, to the military junta that rules Burma (a.k.a. Myanmar).

Meanwhile, the People’s Republic of China, North Korea’s only friend in the world, remains detached from the situation, refusing to do anything that might threaten the stability of Kim’s regime and thereby cause North Korean refugees to flood across the border. China has its own problems right now and is pursuing its own regional goals, hoping to take advantage of the window provided for it by the

Obama détente. The last thing the Chinese need at this point is to have to deal with their pesky wards in Pyongyang.

Against this backdrop, some of the more wayward American dependents have chosen to find their way back home. As we have noted countless times in these pages, as awful as a world under American domination may appear to many countries, the world without American domination appears far more awful and far less secure. And these countries know it. The thought of China serving as the world's policeman in America's stead or, worse yet, of no one serving as the world's policeman is enough to bring some sobriety to the debate over relations with the United States.

Along these lines, the author, journalist, and foreign affairs analyst Max Boot wrote the following last week:

There is an especially large American presence in the Middle East, one of the world's most crisis-prone regions. For all the anti-Americanism in the Arab world, almost all the states bordering what they call the Arabian Gulf support substantial American bases. These governments are worried about the looming Iranian threat and know that only the United States can offer them protection . . .

In the Far East, a similar dynamic prevails. All of China's neighbors happily trade with it, but all are wary of the Middle Kingdom's pretensions to regional hegemony. Even Vietnam, a country that handed America its worst military defeat ever, is eager to establish close ties with Washington as a counter to Beijing . . .

What of America's two most important allies in Northeast Asia – South Korea and Japan? Not long ago, relations with Seoul were frosty because it was pursuing a “sunshine policy” of outreach to North Korea that the George W.

Bush administration (rightly) viewed as one of the world's most dangerous rogue states. More recently, relations with Japan became strained after the election of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2009 on a platform of cozying up to China, rethinking the 50-year-old alliance between the U.S. and Japan, and moving U.S. bases out of Okinawa. Now Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has had to undertake an embarrassing U-turn by agreeing to an earlier plan that would move a U.S. Marine Corps air base from one part of Okinawa to another but keep it on the island.

In justifying his reversal, Hatoyama said that “we cannot afford to reduce the U.S. military deterrence” because of “political uncertainties remaining in East Asia.” There is no shortage of such uncertainties with the Chinese navy becoming increasingly assertive in moving into Japanese waters and with North Korea, which has missiles that can easily hit Japan, sinking a South Korean naval ship with the loss of 46 sailors.

The latter incident naturally has focused attention in Seoul and served to accelerate the reaffirmation of close American-Korean ties that had already begun with the election of the more conservative President Lee Myung-bak in 2008. The anti-Americanism that had been prevalent in South Korea only a few years ago has all but disappeared, and it is not only (or even mainly) because of President Obama's vaunted charm.

Maybe we're wrong. Maybe this was part of Obama's plan all along. Maybe he deserves more than one cheer. But we doubt it.

It's nice to see that there are those who still believe that there is value in American friendship when the

world gets complicated. But it's disconcerting to know that a certain amount of that complication is the fault of disconnected and unconcerned – if not totally clueless – American leaders. It is also disconcerting to think that, after two-and-half more years of dealing with that cluelessness, some of those who believe in American friendship may no longer do so. In a piece written in February of this year, we pondered a handful of possible outcomes as the Obama administration drags on:

“Hedging,” you see, is the theme of global relations under the Obama regime. The Indians don't know if they can trust Obama, and they're making contingency plans. The Japanese don't know if they can trust Obama, and they're making contingency plans. The Australians don't know if they can trust Obama, and they're making contingency plans. *Etc., etc., ad infinitum.*

With regard to Iran and its nukes, what this means is that the United States' erstwhile allies in and near the Middle East have no choice but to make their own contingency plans. They, like everyone else, are simply unable to trust that Obama will live up to the commitments his country has made . . .

The Saudis, for example, will all but certainly seek their own nuclear weapons for purposes of balancing the Shi'ite menace. The Iraqis, grateful to have a functional democratic government, will nonetheless face serious relapses in sectarian strife, as the Sunnis seek protection from nuclear-armed Shi'ites, and the Shi'ites seek protection in the arms of their nuclear-armed co-religionists. The Syrians, the Jordanians, the Egyptians, the Turks, and all the other players in the region will all scramble to improve their respective lots in advance of the Iranian bomb. And all will do so in the expectation

that they cannot trust the Americans to uphold their pledges of support and security or, for that matter, to do much of anything at all.

And don't think for a second that the players in the Middle East will be alone in this scramble. You may recall, for example, that last summer President Obama cravenly surrendered to Russian demands and reneged on a Bush-era agreement to deploy missile shield batteries in Poland and the Czech Republic. And, lo and behold, the Poles and the Czechs were conspicuously upset – not because they feared that they would be in imminent danger from Iranian attack, mind you, but because they knew what would come next, namely an offer of “protection” from Uncle Vlad in Moscow. The entire history of the Eastern and Central European slavs is the history of a people trying to free themselves from Russian dominion. And by virtue of abandoning American protection agreements, the two decades of progress toward that end has all but certainly been undone.

It is worth noting, we believe, that there will all but certainly be other fundamental and radical developments throughout the world in response to the rapidly evolving geopolitical environment, of which the Obama administration's detachment is a significant part. There are, for example, two nations in particular that could, if they so decided, develop nuclear weapons capabilities in a matter of months, given their level of development and technical sophistication. One is Japan, which we have noted, has just cause to fear for its stability, living as it does in a rather rough neighborhood.

The other, of course, is Germany.

Now, for 65-plus years, Germany has had no need whatsoever to worry about its own national defense. Two patron states provided for German security since

the end of World War II and one has continued to do so since the end of the Cold War. This, of course, allowed Germany not simply to resume development of its economic machine, but to affect a pacifism and transnationalism that could, in theory be threatened by current events.

Germany runs a very serious risk of being destroyed economically by its partners in the EMU. It sees one of its fellow members of NATO (the aforementioned Turkey) turning against the West. It has expended resources and lives in support of an American war in a far and distant land. And now, to top it all off, it can no longer necessarily trust that the United States is an unflinching and steadfast ally.

Now, technically Germany's nuclear weapons needs are met by the United States through NATO. But as NATO devolves and perhaps eventually implodes over Turkey, Germany may well see an obligation to its own national security as more important than promises made regarding irrelevant treaties and to unreliable allies.

Germany, like the rest of the world, may find that it too has to "hedge." And as we and countless others have noted, historically, when Germany is compelled to "hedge," when it feels backed into a corner, things tend to get very ugly very quickly.

It's a little bizarre, isn't it, that so many of the world's nations are finding themselves having to hedge against American unpredictability, yet so many of them are hedging by actually getting closer to the United States? One presumes that these are the nations that have no other options, or at least no better option than to ride out the Obama administration and hope that things change again after January 20, 2013.

It's easy, we guess, to declare your independence from mom and pop when you know that they will nonetheless always be there to catch you when you fall. It's not so easy when you can't count on that consistency and have to worry whether they will be too busy "transforming" their own lives to worry about what happens to you.

So give Obama credit for his tough love approach, we guess. Hooray?

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