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## THEY SAID IT

Reading Mr Malcolm Muggeridge's brilliant and depressing book, *The Thirties*, I thought of a rather cruel trick I once played on a wasp. He was sucking jam on my plate, and I cut him in half. He paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed œsophagus. Only when he tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him. It is the same with modern man. The thing that has been cut away is his soul, and there was a period — twenty years, perhaps — during which he did not notice it . . . It is as though in the space of ten years we had slid back into the Stone Age. Human types supposedly extinct for centuries, the dancing dervish, the robber chieftain, the Grand Inquisitor, have suddenly reappeared, not as inmates of lunatic asylums, but as the masters of the world.

George Orwell, "Notes on the Way," 1940.

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## LET THEM EAT GAZPACHO, TURBOT, VEAL, AND RATATOUILLE!

Remember when George H.W. Bush was "out of touch" because he appeared to be surprised at the fascinating new technology of supermarket scanners? Of course, Bush wasn't really surprised. The press made that bit up. But the "out of touch" thing was too good to pass up. It "fit the meme," as they say. Rich, white dude doesn't get out amongst the common people enough to know what it's like to buy groceries. Oh dear!

Given this counterfeit hysteria at the 41<sup>st</sup> President's social obliviousness, what do you suppose that same press would have done, lo those many years ago, if George's First Lady had decided to take off for a lavish holiday, during which she rented out an entire five-star hotel, cleared out a private beach, hobnobbed with a handful Hollywood b-listers, and hung out with the Spanish King, at a time when this country was suffering through "the worst economy since the Great Depression?"

We can only guess at the answer, naturally, since Barbara Bush never did any such thing, and, even if she had, no Hollywood b-, c-, or d-lister would have been caught dead with the frumpy, old, bourgeois Mrs. Bush.

But our guess is that the media would have gone crazy with both delight and rage. Grocery shopping with the president was good fun, but a \$75,000 a day vacation? While the country suffered and children went to bed hungry? That would have been something serious and illuminating. It would have been impeachable, we dare say. At the very least, Mrs. Bush would have been held up for all eternity as the very epitome of garish,

conspicuous consumption and right-wing insensitivity. The so-called “decade of greed” would have had a successor with the “First Lady of Gluttony.”

And how do you suppose the media would react if a Democratic First Lady did the very same thing? Fortunately, we don’t have to guess at this one.

As we are sure most of you know, First Lady Michelle Obama has spent the better part of the last week living it up in Spain, showing her daughter a good time, and generally consuming as conspicuously as possible.

And the reaction from the mainstream press this time has been . . . well . . . less than ear-shattering. A handful of complaints have surfaced, here and there. But for the most part, no one – outside of the overtly right-leaning Fox News and a handful of conservative columnists – seems much to care. And those few objections that have surfaced among the mainstreamers have been as tired as they are tiresome.

Consider, for example the response offered this weekend by the dame of catty columnists Maureen Dowd, who spent most of the last decade skewering the Bushes for their alleged infractions against the decency of civil society. Mz. Dowd wrote:

In politics and pop culture, optics are all. And Michelle’s optics sent a message that likely made some in the White House and the Democratic Party wince.

She seemed to be giggling her husband a bit: I’m going to do what I want to do. I can’t worry about whether it gives the Tea Partiers ammo or makes Democrats (including you) campaigning against the excesses of the rich look hypocritical. Even if the country is sliding into a double-dip recession, I’m going abroad to a five-star hotel on Air Force Two and give a boost to another country’s economy.

Really? That’s it? “Looks hypocritical,” and bad optics? That’s all she can muster?

In response to this vicious attack, White House political guru David Axelrod countered, “Folks in the public eye are also human beings.” Well, of course. We hadn’t thought about it that way. But you know, he’s right. Sure, the mean, nasty “teabaggers” may want to make Mrs. Obama look like a hypocrite and an out-of-touch spendthrift. But that’s just not nice to do to a human being, and especially one who wants to enjoy one of six vacations this summer with her daughters before she has to pack them back off to the \$32,000 a year Sidwell Friends School. How insensitive. Mrs. Obama can and should vacation wherever and however she wants. She just needs to be a little more conscious of those darned “optics.”

Interestingly, Mz. Dowd was not the only commentator to have noticed the downright stupid optics of Mrs. Obama’s vacation. The Democratic consultant Kirsten Powers called it a “PR disaster.” And Megan McCardle, the business and economics editor for *The Atlantic* and that magazine’s resident conservative blogger, wrote: “while there’s nothing actually wrong with it, it’s really quite unbelievably politically stupid.”

Mrs. McCardle’s comment, we think, begs a question – or rather a series of questions: If it was so stupid, why did she do it? Why did the White House okay the trip? Why did no one think about the *optics* beforehand? Why did it never occur to anyone in the Obama administration that a nearly half-million dollar jaunt to Spain might look bad?

There are, we believe, two possible answers to these questions. The most likely is that no one thought about any of this simply because no one thought about it. It never crossed anyone’s mind, even for a second, that there was anything even remotely untoward about the First Lady gassing up the Vice President’s jet and taking off for Spain to spend a few quiet days at a posh Spanish resort.

The other answer, which we think is less likely, but would make equal sense and would tell a great deal more about the Obamas and the political ground they occupy, is that the Obamas knew that the trip would create bad optics and generate terrible PR, but they didn't care. And why should they? Who cares what "the people" think? And more to the point, what are they going to do about it? Vote for John Boehner and Mitch McConnell? Ha! Fat lot of difference that would make. Obama would still be president for at least two more years, having earned that right. And who's to say that he even cares about re-election?

If you think that it's simply impossible that the Obama's wouldn't care what kind of reactions their behavior generated, then clearly you haven't been paying attention to the general attitude of the new privileged class to which they belong. Take a look at the papers (or, better yet, the political blogs) from the past couple of weeks. What do you see?

Well, among other things, you see the Secretary of State's daughter getting hitched to the well-heeled son of a crooked former Congressman and spending somewhere between \$3 and \$5 million in the process, according to the *New York Post*. You see a bill for "temporary restrooms" at the wedding that alone cost as much as the entire typical American wedding. You see, believe it or not, an \$11,000 cake.

If Mrs. Obama is the modern-day Marie Antoinette, as has been suggested by various right-leaning pundits, then when she declares that the peasants should eat cake, they'll line up anxiously to get the crumbs from Chelsea's wedding feast.

If you keep looking, you also see the senior Senator from Massachusetts whining and complaining about having to cough up an extra \$500,000 in excise and sales taxes on his new yacht, taxes he didn't intend to pay until he was caught trying to dodge the taxman by mooring the yacht in Rhode Island. What you see, then, is a *sales tax bill* that is equal, roughly, to ten times the media household income in this country. And you see a yacht that cost \$7 million and was built for a valiant opponent of outsourcing in New Zealand.

If you really dig, you may see a report from the Sunlight Foundation detailing the extravagant eating and drinking habits of the "people's government" in Washington. You may see that, over the last nine months, the House of Representatives alone spent almost as much on food and drink for themselves and their staffs than the Clintons spent on Chelsea's absurdly expensive wedding. You may see the Sunlight Foundation's House Expenditure Reports Database, which details the \$2.6 million that our beloved Congressmen and women spent on food and drinks since last October.

You see the Speaker of the House flying home for recess on her taxpayer-funded private jet. You see the Congressman from Harlem brought up on ethics charges for, among other things, failing to report the income earned from his Caribbean vacation home. You see the Congresswoman who once accused the CIA of starting the crack cocaine epidemic brought up on ethics charges as well, for abusing her office to win favors for the bank where her husband held stock and served on the board of directors.

In short, then, you see the members of our ruling class – and the "party of the people" in particular – living well and enjoying themselves. And again, why shouldn't they? Some of these people may be oblivious to the "bad optics" involved in this profligacy. But certainly not all of them are. Some of them are simply taking their cue from Rhett Butler, who put it this way: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Peggy Noonan, the onetime conservative speechwriter and erstwhile Obama-con, wrote last week that she sees the country nearing a "boiling point," and attributes the heat driving this process to the cluelessness and/or entitlement noted above. She put it this way:

Do our political leaders have any sense of what people are feeling deep down? They don't act as if they do. I think their detachment from how normal people think is more dangerous and disturbing

than it has been in the past. I started noticing in the 1980s the growing gulf between the country's thought leaders, as they're called—the political and media class, the universities—and those living what for lack of a better word we'll call normal lives on the ground in America. The two groups were agitated by different things, concerned about different things, had different focuses, different world views.

But I've never seen the gap wider than it is now. I think it is a chasm. In Washington they don't seem to be looking around and thinking, Hmmm, this nation is in trouble, it needs help. They're thinking something else. I'm not sure they understand the American Dream itself needs a boost, needs encouragement and protection. They don't seem to know or have a sense of the mood of the country.

Although we are generally wont to disagree with much of what Ms. Noonan writes these days, we think she makes a strong point here, in spite of herself; that being that there is indeed a chasm between normal Americans and their thought leaders.

Unfortunately, Noonan's insight is fleeting. She goes on to say that the people want the border closed while Washington wants comprehensive immigration reform. The people want jobs, while Washington wants health care. And so on. But what Noonan misses – largely because she herself is one of the nation's "thought leaders" – is that the differences between Washington and the rest of the country aren't as trivial as mere policy preferences or priorities. The entire political culture, the entire fraudulent system that rewards arrogance and thrives on condescension, is the source of the "normal people's" political alienation. Policy and party be damned. This is bigger and more fundamental.

Now, all of this is not to say that this alienation is, in its nature, historically unprecedented. Make no mistake, the United States has always had some significant internal conflict between the rulers and ruled. Such a divide is, in many ways, inevitable in nation born from and dedicated to the concept of liberty.

That said, the divide today is notably different than it has been historically. The ruling class is more powerful today than it has ever been, and, more to the point, its opposition is weaker today than it has ever been. There is, for the first time in American history, no rival power base to oppose the ruling class or to thwart its will.

As we have argued countless times before, the "political-regulatory complex" brings together all the sources of real power in this country and binds them in an indissoluble web of collusive relationships. Legislators crave power. Regulators provide power. Legislators crave re-election. Big Business and interest groups provide contributions for re-election. Big Business craves the elimination of competition. Legislators and Regulators eliminate the competition. Interest group leaders want goodies. Legislators and Regulators provide goodies.

This last example, that involving interest groups and their leaders, demonstrates perfectly the evolution of the American ruling class and its increasing insulation from the rest of the country. In his essay "America's Ruling Class – And the Perils of Revolution," from which we quoted heavily in a recent piece, our old friend Angelo Codevilla describes the perversion of the system that was once heralded as "interest group democracy." He writes:

*To the extent party leaders do not have to worry about voters, they can choose privileged interlocutors, representing those in society whom they find most amenable. In America ever more since the 1930s – elsewhere in the world this practice is ubiquitous and long-standing – government*

has designated certain individuals, companies, and organizations within each of society's sectors as (junior) partners in elaborating laws and administrative rules for those sectors. The government empowers the persons it has chosen over those not chosen, deems them the sector's true representatives, and rewards them. They become part of the ruling class.

Thus in 2009-10 the American Medical Association (AMA) strongly supported the new medical care law, which the administration touted as having the support of "the doctors" even though the vast majority of America's 975,000 physicians opposed it. Those who run the AMA, however, have a government contract as exclusive providers of the codes by which physicians and hospitals bill the government for their services. The millions of dollars that flow thereby to the AMA's officers keep them in line, while the impracticality of doing without the billing codes tamps down rebellion in the doctor ranks. When the administration wanted to bolster its case that the state of Arizona's enforcement of federal immigration laws was offensive to Hispanics, the National Association of Chiefs of Police – whose officials depend on the administration for their salaries – issued a statement that the laws would endanger all Americans by raising Hispanics' animosity. This reflected conversations with the administration rather than a vote of the nation's police chiefs.

Similarly, modern labor unions are ever less bunches of workers banding together and ever more bundled under the aegis of an organization chosen jointly by employers and government. Prototypical is the Service Employees

International Union, which grew spectacularly by persuading managers of government agencies as well as of publicly funded private entities that placing their employees in the SEIU would relieve them of responsibility. Not by being elected by workers' secret ballots did the SEIU conquer workplace after workplace, but rather by such deals, or by the union presenting what it claims are cards from workers approving of representation. The union gets 2 percent of the workers' pay, which it recycles as contributions to the Democratic Party, which it recycles in greater power over public employees. The union's leadership is part of the ruling class's beating heart.

The point is that a doctor, a building contractor, a janitor, or a schoolteacher counts in today's America insofar as he is part of the *hierarchy* of a sector organization affiliated with the ruling class. Less and less do such persons count as voters.

Take just a minute and think about who – which prominent interest groups, that is – supported the health care reform legislation. There was the AARP, of course, which climbed on board not because of its members' preferences, but in spite of them. There was Wal-Mart, which supported "reform" not because its employees wanted it, but because reform got it off the hook for having to provide health care coverage itself. Codevilla mentions the AMA and its ruling-class leaders, and his critique could be applied as to the American Hospital Association, the Federation of American Hospitals, and the Catholic Health Association, all of which jumped on board, despite sometimes vehement opposition from their individual members.

Now, there's a name for this kind of self-sustaining circular relationship in which the ruling class makes all the decisions and reaps most of the benefits while

the rest of the country is, essentially, locked out of the process. Actually, there are several names. But the most accurate and the least offensive is “corporatism.”

Those who carry on about “optics,” political stupidity, or disastrous PR miss this point entirely. The President and his advisors didn’t “screw up.” It is hard to screw up something about which you don’t even care.

This isn’t a case of the administration being out of touch simply because they haven’t talked to enough regular folk. This is a case of the administration being out of touch because they don’t care what the regular folk have to say. Like Mussolini, this country’s ruling class has figured out that things just work better if you determine ahead of time who the relevant actors are and ignore the rest. Please note, though, that when we write that things “work better,” we mean to say that they work better *for the ruling class*. It’s not that the trains are made to run on time, in other words. It’s that, in theory, it is easier to pass the legislation that divvies up the subsidies and promises that the trains will run on time.

From the standpoint of the ruling class, the beauty of this arrangement is that the overwhelming majority of the time, the “people” can be counted on not to raise much of a fuss about it. Peggy Noonan concludes that the country is reaching a boiling point and that Americans’ psyches are suffering from “inner pessimism and powerlessness,” which constitute “a dangerous combination.” Maybe she’s right. We certainly hope she is. But we’re not sure that we’re willing to hold our breath.

Our ruling class, after all, is steeped in the post-modern mush that characterizes “elite” education these days. They’ve been raised on Nietzsche and Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault. And they believe that they can count on what Karl Lowith, in a discussion of Nietzsche’s “herd-animals” and “leader-animals,” called the “‘mediocrity’ of the majority.” Nietzsche provided the blueprint:

A man who has developed and preserved a strong will, together with a great spirit, has better prospects than ever before. For in this democratic Europe, the capacity of men to submit to training has become very great. Men who learn easily, who submit easily, are the rule; the herd-animal, extremely intelligent, has been prepared. Whoever can command will find those who must obey.

All of this is to say, then, that our ruling class has convinced itself that as long as some people can be distracted by shiny new Ipods and 3-D flat-screens, and others by an extension in unemployment benefits, they, the ruling class, can do whatever they like, never having to give a second thought to how ostentatious, self-absorbed, or self-reverential they appear. To the warning that the “people are revolting,” their answer is, “yes, they certainly are.”

The updated version of Reagan’s old query about whether you are better off than you were four years ago no longer asks you to ponder whether you are “materially, spiritually, emotionally better off and enjoying greater liberty and prosperity,” but rather asks you to look at your baubles and consider whether you’ve managed to collect more. And if you have, why should you care or even feel entitled to ask what kind of hotel Michelle Obama rents out as she takes one of her six summer vacations with the girls?

The question now is whether the ruling class is right about the “herd-animals” over which they rule. Obviously, Peggy Noonan thinks – or rather “worries” – that the herd-animals will eventually have more than they are willing to stand. More relevant, from our perspective, Codevilla agrees:

The ruling class’s appetite for deference, power, and perks grows. The country class disrespects its rulers, wants to curtail their power and reduce their perks. The ruling class wears on its sleeve the view that the rest of Americans are racist, greedy, and above

all stupid. The country class is ever more convinced that our rulers are corrupt, malevolent, and inept. The rulers want the ruled to shut up and obey. The ruled want self-governance. The clash between the two is about which side's vision of itself and of the other is right and which is wrong. Because each side – especially the ruling class – embodies its views on the issues, concessions by one side to another on any issue tend to discredit that side's view of itself. One side or the other will prevail. The clash is as sure and momentous as its outcome is unpredictable.

Certainly, there is evidence – seen most vividly in the Tea Party movement – that the country class has, in fact, had enough. But at the same time, there is evidence that the country class doesn't really care all that much about its liberty or the burden placed upon it by the ruling class and will give an effective landslide to any Tom, Dick, or Barry who promises them lots of shiny objects to have, hold, and play MP3s on, and, of course, “free” health care.

If we had to guess, we'd guess that Angelo is right and that the clash is inevitable, if for no other reason than the corporate structure our rulers have established is, in the long run, unable to sustain itself.

We imagine that if this is so and such clashes take place, they will come as a tremendous shock to our ruling class and to our president in particular. We have written countless times about his disdain for you, the American people, and his belief that you must be forcefully led, poor stupid animals that you are. If it turns out that you're smart enough and irritated enough to realize that Michelle's excellent adventure in Spain was not merely bad PR or ill-fated “optics,” but was, rather, emblematic of a rotten and arrogant *Ancien Regime*, that will certainly come as a surprise the folks who populate 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. And a great many others as well.

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