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THEY SAID IT

A madman's thoughts are just the usual ideas of a human being, except that they're hermetically sealed inside his head. The world never gets into his head, and that's the way he wants it. A sealed head is like a lake without an outlet, standing, stagnant.

Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 1934.

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IT'S THE USURPATION, STUPID.

One of the most tiresome tropes in the election analysis business is the insistence, by both self-labeled moderates and libertarians, that Republicans spend far too much time worrying about cultural issues and not enough time worrying about what really matters, things like taxes, regulation, and the size and scope of government. If Republicans would just get off their proverbial crosses and get over their obsessions with abortion, and gay marriage, and the rest, we are told time and time again, they would be much better off and would fair much better in elections. It's not the fetuses that matter, they say; it's big government, stupid.

Not surprisingly, this worn out formula for electoral "success" is back again this year, and with even greater support than usual, owing, we suppose, to the strength of the Tea Party movement, which, at its core, is impelled by government recklessness and fecklessness. Listen to the Tea Partiers, Republicans are told by the anti-cultural crusaders. They have it all figured out. And even if they don't, we do.

Typical of this genre is a piece written last week by Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Center, and titled, fittingly enough: "Memo to Republicans: It's Big Government, Stupid!" Tanner put it this way:

Riding a record of unprecedented government spending, rising debt, a government takeover of the health-care system, high unemployment, and proposals to tax everything they stumble across, Democrats have put themselves in position for an epic electoral defeat that will rival the Republican debacles of 2006 and 2008.

Given this record of Democratic ineptitude and the voters' reaction to it, one would think that Republicans would be talking about these issues every day. Instead, Republicans and conservatives have spent recent weeks talking about such distracting side-issues as immigration, the 14th amendment, gay marriage, and when and where mosques should be built.

No doubt these are important issues to various constituencies. But, the merits of the issues aside, if Republicans believe that the key to victory this year is to re-fight the culture wars, they are mistaken.

This, to put it mildly, makes our heads hurt. It's true, we guess, in a very narrow sense. Voters are, in fact, unhappy about the size, cost, and intrusiveness of government. But the insistence that "cultural issues" are somehow independent of those concerns, which therefore means that the "culture wars" are obsolete, is myopic to say the least. Moreover, it misses the point completely and therefore underestimates the broader assault on the institutions and people of this country.

Take a look, for a minute, at the so-called "cultural" anxieties that are diverting Republican attention from the real business of the republic this election season. Tanner, dear heart that he is, does us the favor of listing a handful of these "distracting side-issues": "immigration, the 14th amendment, gay marriage, and when and where mosques should be built."

Now, leave aside the issue of the 14th amendment, which we happen to believe is, in fact, nothing more than a distraction, since the fact of the matter is that the Constitution is not going to be amended any time soon, irrespective of what one might think about the merits of re-examining birthright citizenship.

Beyond that, though, the "distractions" that constitute the cultural squabbles of the day are anything but distracting. If anything, they do a better job of

framing the true, fundamental concerns that voters have with the current administration, the current government, and the current ruling class than any of the issues the secular right finds more appealing.

Each of the cultural issues that folks like Tanner detest presents a case where the overwhelming majority of Americans favors a specific policy initiative or position, while their "betters" in the ruling class oppose that position.

On immigration, the populace at large supports Arizona's efforts to enforce federal law and to manage its own borders. By contrast, the Obama administration opposes the law and has even gone so far as to sue Arizona to pre-empt it from enforcing federal law.

On gay marriage, again the majority of Americans supports a traditional definition of marriage, one that stipulates that marriage is a union between one man and one woman. More to the point, a majority of Californians – that is to say the most socially liberal populace in the country – supports reserving the term "marriage" for heterosexual couples. The state's voters not only passed a referendum to that effect, but when the constitutionality of that law was challenged, the voters went so far as to amend their constitution to the same end.

Not that any of this mattered much to federal judge Vaughn Walker, who ruled that the California constitutional amendment violated both the Due Process clause and the Equal Protection clause of the federal Constitution and thereby not only voided California's constitutional provision, but created a new federal right to gay marriage, applicable in all 50 states.

On the mosque controversy in New York, yet again, a majority of Americans and a majority of New Yorkers, who are yet again a radically liberal population, oppose the construction of a new Islamic worship and cultural center in the shadow of the Twin Towers, essentially on the holy ground of Ground Zero. Most Americans – or at least those who have chosen to articulate arguments in support of most Americans

– acknowledge that the Muslim groups backing the mosque have an absolute legal and constitutional right to build on land that they own, but ask simply that these groups show some sympathy for those murdered in the name of Islam on that spot.

Does any of this matter, even slightly to the ruling class? Need we ask? New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, President Barack Obama, and virtually the entirety of this nation’s “smart set” see this as a non-issue. The mosque is going to be built and those who don’t like it are free to shut up. The Cordoba Initiative owns the land and they can do with it as they please, sympathies for 9/11 victims, families, and other obsessives be damned.

What all of these issues have in common, then, is that they pit the majority of Americans against their rulers. But the similarities don’t end there.

President Obama has said that the Arizona immigration law is corrosive to a multi-ethnic society, claiming that “now, suddenly, if you don’t have your papers, and you took your kid out to get ice cream, you’re going to get harassed.” Obama’s State Department, in the person of Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner, actually compared Arizona’s efforts to stabilize immigration to some of China’s most heinous totalitarian human rights violations.

When Judge Walker ruled on gay marriage in California, he not only overturned the will of some seven million Californians, charging them with violating the constitutional rights of gay men and women, he also charged them with bigotry and hatred, arguing that opinions about the institution of marriage contrary to his own simply could not be based upon anything other than prejudice. Opposition to gay marriage, he wrote, is rooted in “animus towards gays and lesbians.” And discomfort with a radical redefinition of a 10,000 year-old institution, he argued, is “nothing more than a fear or unarticulated dislike of same-sex couples.” Seven million Californians, in short, are not just wrong, they are hateful homophobes.

In New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, naturally a supporter of the Cordoba Initiative, decided as well that opposition to mosque project could be based on little more than prejudice and hate. According to Bloomberg, this is exclusively a matter of religious tolerance, which is to say that opponents of the project are intolerant and, as he put it recently, “should be ashamed of themselves.”

What all of this tells us, then, is that these “cultural issues” not only pit the ruling class against the majority of Americans, but actually demonstrate the ruling class’s utter and complete disdain for the majority of Americans. Americans, you see, are not cautious, self-reflective people concerned about the condition of their nation and its institutions. They are bigots. And racists. And hateful homophobes. They are like the Chinese regime, which slaughters its own people for dissent. They are monsters, in short, who ought to be ashamed of themselves and out to thank their betters for saving them from themselves.

People like Michael Tanner and the rest of the secular right see issues such as immigration, gay marriage, and the Ground Zero mosque as “cultural” and therefore peripheral, when, in fact, they are the heart of the divide that characterizes this country today. There is nothing peripheral about them. Indeed, they make explicit the contempt that the American ruling class holds for its “subjects” – a contempt that defines the non-cultural issues as well.

According to Tanner, Americans want government to focus on “creating jobs, reducing spending, repealing Obamacare, and cutting the size of government.” We don’t disagree, necessarily. But we’re not entirely sure that he understands why most Americans are upset and why they think these issues are so critical and spark so much earnest emotion.

Consider, for example, the case of Obamacare – and please forgive us if you’ve heard this one before. On health care, the overwhelming majority of Americans were opposed to the version of reform that passed the Congress. They demonstrated their opposition in town hall meetings, in Tea Party protests, and told it

to the pollsters. Now that the law has been passed, a majority of Americans want it repealed, which is to say that their opposition was anything but fleeting.

At the same time, the ruling class simply doesn't care. They passed the bill anyway. They have no intention of seeing it or any part of it repealed. All of which is to say that health care and its reform pit the majority of Americans against their rulers.

Ahhhh . . . but the similarities don't end there. When opposition to health care reform was at its peak, the Democratic leaders of this country – i.e. those pushing reform – were angrily and summarily dismissive of their political opponents. The Speaker of the House and the House Majority Leader took to the pages of *USA Today* to call reform opponents “un-American.” When the Congress voted on the final form of the bill, supporters claimed that opponents were hateful and racist, spitting on and shouting racial epithets at those who dared to “do what's right.”

What all of this tells us, then – and again, please forgive us if you've heard this before – is that health care reform not only pits the ruling class against the majority of Americans, but actually demonstrates the ruling class's utter and complete disdain for the majority of Americans. Americans, you see, are not cautious, self-reflective people concerned about the condition of their nation and its institutions. They are bigots. Racists. And they are downright un-American.

On spending, the story's the same. Majorities oppose. Rulers don't care. In fact, they think the majorities are stupid, unthinking, and uncaring.

Size of government? Majorities oppose growth. Rulers don't care. *Etc., etc., ad nauseam.*

The fact of the matter is that the distinction between so-called cultural issues and other, more secular issues is a false distinction. The specific subject matter may be different. But ultimately, that subject matter is irrelevant. The “issue,” as it were, isn't really the issue. What is truly of concern is the nation's ruling class and its contempt for the rest of the country.

Tanner doesn't mention it in his list, but we wonder what he would think of corruption as an issue. On the one hand, it's a moral concern and therefore similar to other cultural issues. On the other hand, it presents a case where government is bloated and can't be cut; where spending is exaggerated and can't be trimmed because legislators and administrators, once ensconced, enjoy the trappings of power and too often use them illegally and unethically. Or, to return to Acton: power corrupts.

Whatever the case – cultural, not cultural – corruption fits the broader pattern. The two legislators most recently accused by the House Ethics Committee of wrongdoing – Charlie Rangel and Maxine Waters – have both turned their cases upside down, insisting that it is the people and their institutions that are to blame, not the legislators' own moral depravity. Rangel claims that he will not discuss a plea deal or agreement of any sort, insisting that such things constitute “an old Anglo-Saxon Procedure” – which, in his estimation, is about as damning a criticism as there is. Waters, for her part, sees institutional and specifically Republican racism for her problems. It's both Bush's fault, you see, and the new Ethics Committee's fault. They're out to get her and other black legislators.

Water's problems stem from an abuse of TARP, which as Tanner could tell us is one of the “real” issues that have Americans upset. But does that make her corruption a real issue? Or because her charge involves race, is it a cultural issue?

Who knows? And more to the point, who cares? The distinction does not matter in slightest because, as we said, the “issue” isn't the issue.

Alexis de Tocqueville, among others, noted that the particular brilliance of the American Founders was the manner in which they constructed the institutions of their new nation to reflect the will of the people while, at the same time, safeguarding against the traditional democratic flaw facilitating what he termed “the tyranny of the majority.” The nature of a republic is to ensure that while the people remain sovereign, the impulses of the masses are restrained by the

institutions and the leaders whose job it is to promote liberty for all and protect each individual's human and natural rights.

But how long can the republic survive when those tasked with preserving it no longer believe that the people should be sovereign? Or to put this in another way, what happens when the ruling class feels, demonstrates, and shamelessly verbalizes its contempt for the citizens of the nation, who are, theoretically at least, sovereign over them? As we noted last week, "To the warning that the 'people are revolting,'" our ruling class answers "yes, they certainly are." That is, to put it briefly, an inversion and a perversion of the constitutional system the Founders created and that the likes of Tocqueville extolled.

People like Michael Tanner mean well. We know that. But in attempting to distinguish between cultural and non-cultural issues, they miss the point entirely and, in so doing, minimize the crisis that confronts this country.

The cultural issues that Tanner decries as distractions are, in truth, perfect crystallizations of the abuse of power perpetrated against the purportedly sovereign people of the United States. Even those who, for example, support abortion rights or are unbothered by the idea of two men getting hitched should object to the idea that those matters can be decided by this country's rulers not just in contravention of the will of the people, but in open contempt of that will.

In this sense, the "cultural issues" differ not one whit from the issues that the secular right considers more important. It's not the big government, after all, you see. It's the complete and total arrogation of power by the ruling class and the concomitant disenfranchisement of the sovereign people. Or to put it another way: It's the usurpation, stupid.

OBAMA'S KATRINA? YOU BET!

When the Obama administration finally ends, particularly if that takes place in 2013 rather than 2017, the epitaph of his presidency may well be nearly identical to that of George W. Bush. Both men and both presidencies may, in the end, be done in by nearly exactly the same set of circumstances.

Now, we're well aware that since BP's Deepwater Horizon blew up this spring, this has been a pretty common sentiment. Both men suffered excessively from disasters that affected the Gulf of Mexico. Both men suffered specifically because said disasters exposed their personal incompetence and that of their top disaster-preparedness administrators. Both men appeared clueless and callous. Both men fiddled while the Gulf burned. Et cetera, et cetera . . .

All of this is true enough, we suppose, but only at the surface level. If one looks deeper at the presidencies and specifically at the Gulf of Mexico disasters that befell them, one will see that both men and their public image suffered not because of a disaster *per se*, but because of left-wing fantasies surrounding those disasters.

With regard to Bush and Katrina, this story is, by now, well known among those who care to know it. But it is worth reviewing, we think.

In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, we, as a nation, were told several things, almost all of which turned out to be untrue. We were told that the federal government had failed and did nothing to help survivors. We were told that old and poor black residents of New Orleans were ignored by rescue efforts and were left pitilessly to die. We were told that civil society itself had collapsed in New Orleans and that man had reverted to his primitive nature. Three years ago, on the second anniversary of the Hurricane, National Review's Jonah Goldberg summed up the early reports:

Few of us can forget the reports from two years ago. CNN warned that there were "bands of rapists, going block

to block.” Snipers were reportedly shooting at medical personnel. Bodies at the Superdome, we were told, were stacked like cordwood. The *Washington Post* proclaimed in a banner headline that New Orleans was “A City of Despair and Lawlessness,” insisting in an editorial that “looters and carjackers, some of them armed, have run rampant.” Fox News anchor John Gibson said there were “all kinds of reports of looting, fires and violence. Thugs shooting at rescue crews.”

TV reporters raced to the bottom to see who could moralistically preen the most. Interviewers transformed into outright scolds of administration officials. Meanwhile, the distortions, exaggerations and flat-out fictions being offered by New Orleans officials were accelerated and amplified by the media echo chamber. Glib predictions of 10,000 dead, and the chief of police’s insistence that there were “little babies getting raped,” swirled around the media like so much free-flowing sewage . . .

Fortunately for everyone, but especially those in New Orleans, all of this was pure, untainted excrement. None of it ever happened.

After Katrina, when residents of New Orleans were relocated by the Bush administration, many localities complained that this relocation had just compounded the situation, spreading New Orleans’s problems around and sharply increasing crime rates in any number of cities hosting hurricane-refugees.

Turns out none of that happened either. As the *Houston Chronicle* reported this spring:

A huge crime wave blamed on thousands of Katrina evacuees in Houston and other Southwest cities never happened, say criminologists who warned public

officials and the media to be careful in attributing crime to the former New Orleans residents.

Five criminologists who reviewed crime statistics published a study in the current issue of the *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and found only a “modest” increase in the murder rates of Houston and Phoenix, and none in San Antonio, three cities that took in thousands of evacuees from storm-ravaged New Orleans.

The researchers did not find an accompanying rise in auto theft and assaults and other crimes, which they said would have been expected if dispossessed evacuees were responsible for a crime hike.

Sure, none of this lets Bush off the hook entirely. Certainly he did make mistakes. And none of this is to say that conditions were not and are not still exceptionally difficult in New Orleans. There is no doubt that Katrina did severe damage to the city, its infrastructure and its civic community. But it didn’t do what we were told it did.

Indeed, all that any of this demonstrates is that the prevailing storyline about Bush’s manifest and perhaps racially motivated incompetence was simply untrue. And the heavy toll that this storyline took on Bush’s presidency was an unquestioned victory for hysteria mixed with ideological prejudice. When, CNN’s Anderson Cooper insisted that “everything changed” after Katrina, he couldn’t have been more ridiculously wrong. Nothing changed, nothing, that is, except that the media and the political opposition (our apologies for the redundancy) finally had a club with which to bash Bush.

Fast forward to this past April. Again, the Gulf was under siege, only this time by oil. The entire ecosystem of the Gulf of Mexico was threatened. The loss of this precious resource was inevitable. We

know this for a fact. We saw James Carville cry about it on TV. And really, what more evidence do you need?

And again, the federal government was to blame, and the president in particular was revealed by both his actions and inactions to be a manifestly incompetent boob. Obama's delay and indecision, coupled with his administration's ineptitude were undeniably damaging – not just to the Gulf of Mexico, but to the Obama presidency as well. It was Katrina, Part II, we were told. Only worse.

The well would never be capped. The oil would gush forever. The rig would collapse. Oil was going to follow the currents around the peninsula of Florida and then right up the entire eastern seaboard. The disaster would, when all was said and done, be biblical in proportion!

Or, well, not. As it turns out, this was Katrina, Part II, alright. But only because the hysterics were, well, hysterical. Again. As Lou Dolinar, an author and former columnist for *Newsday*, put it:

Four months after the Deepwater Horizon spill — which President Obama called the “worst environmental disaster America has ever faced” — the oil is disappearing, and fisheries are returning to normal. It turns out that this incident exposed some things that are seriously wrong in the world of oil — and I don't mean exploding wells. There was a broad-based failure on the part of the media, the science establishment, and the federal bureaucracy. With the nation and its leaders looking for facts, we got instead a massive plume of apocalyptic mythology and threats of Armageddon. In the Gulf, this misinformation has cost jobs, lowered property values, and devastated tourism, and its effects on national policy could be deep and far-reaching.

Sigh.

For weeks on end, the Gulf oil spill was the number one story in the papers, on the network telecasts, on the news talk shows. The damage the spill was causing was, at the same time “incalculable” and measured in tens of billions of dollars. “Deepwater Horizon” became a household phrase. “Big deal” doesn't even begin to do it justice.

Then it just went away. And they all lived happily ever after. The end.

Only, as Dolinar points out, not everyone will live happily ever after. It is entirely possible that the only real damage from this “disaster” will be the economic damage caused by the left's hysteria, the mainstream media's short memory, and the Obama administration's willingness to prostrate itself before both with its stupid and pointless deepwater drilling ban.

As with Katrina, there was a real and serious problem, followed by some real and serious real world concerns. But, again, most of those were exaggerated to the point of absurdity, all in the pursuit ratings, readers, and political scalps.

Now, that's not to say that this Gulf disaster and Katrina are perfect copies of one another. There are some differences, after all.

For example, this time, unlike the last, the presidential administration was not the primary target of the hysteria, but merely an unfortunate bystander. The real targets, of course, were the nasty, mean old oil industry and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the nasty, mean old Republicans who chanted “drill baby, drill.” It is probably considered unfortunate by those who pushed this meme that Obama had to be destroyed in the process, but, you know, sometimes sacrifices have to be made. And as for the end result of destroying BP and tarring the oil industry in general, Obama's presidency may have been a small price to pay.

Barack Obama has, we note, gone on record more than once saying that he would be happy to be a one-term president if, in that one term, he was able to

transform the country. We're not sure that this was exactly what he had in mind, but because of the Gulf disaster that wasn't, he may get his wish.

Maybe when it's over, he and George Bush can have dinner together, eat gulf shrimp in a nice restaurant in New Orleans and laugh about how neither their meal nor its setting was supposed to exist anymore. They'll both be out of work, of course, as will several thousands who were once involved in the Gulf oil industry.

The media hysterics will still have jobs, though, we suppose. And they'll be waiting and watching for the next disaster and the next to blow out of proportion. *C'est la vie*, we guess.

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