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THEY SAID IT

Now I am resigned, in advance, to the loss of an American city by a nuclear weapon. The End of the World now looks like a comic-book premise, a Heston-movie conceit. We feared it would all be gone in a day, our world upended like an Etch-A-Sketch. What we never considered was a long, slow war, a conflict that burned and sputtered, skittered from one spot on the map to the other. The old wars were simple: the other side had accents, uniforms, nations, cruel habits and urbane sneers. The old wars took years. The old wars were in black and white. The old wars were monophonic, scored by Max Steiner, released by Warner Brothers, and the only proof they really happened at all was the small battered box in the back of Dad's sock drawer, the box that held some oddly colored metal bars. The next war would be horrible, total, and short.

Two years ago today I was convinced that every presumption I had about the future was wrong. This war, I feared, would be horrible, total, and long.

Blogger and columnist James Lileks, "The Bleat," September 11, 2003.

BEYOND 9/11.

It's been a long time – eight years, in fact – since we marked the anniversary of 9/11 with a comment or two. Indeed, while we have written on terrorism from time to time and, naturally, on the war against it, we have not had a great deal to say about that horrible day specifically, lo these many years.

But for some reason, this year's anniversary felt different. Maybe it's the fact that the whole country feels different these days. Or maybe it's the fact that this year's anniversary marked the appearance of a full-fledged effort on the part of many of the political and media elites to convince the rest of us poor schlubs that 9/11 wasn't what we thought it was; that we overreacted to it; that we gave it far greater significance either than it deserved or than the terrorists could have given it themselves.

Or maybe it's the combination of the two, since they are, not surprisingly, related.

Whatever the case, we have the sense – and an overwhelming one at that – that there is a growing disconnect in this country, one which could rather easily erupt into political and social chaos. You see, while the nation's political leaders and media mavens are growing more and more complacent and believing less and less in the intrinsic threat posed by radical Islam, the American public is growing increasingly restless and frustrated with the imprudence of their ruling class.

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If the end result of all of this is another act of war perpetrated against the United States by radical Islam, then the anger and frustration felt by a majority – or, at the very least, a very large plurality – of Americans is going to be both palpable and directed in part at their ruling class. Moreover, it strikes us that such a reaction would be entirely justified, given that the course embarked upon by said ruling class does appear, to us at least, to make such an attack more, not less likely.

Nine years after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it is all too obvious that there are still far too many powerbrokers, movers, and shakers in this country who have no idea how or why the attacks took place and no idea what to do to secure the nation from further attacks. So while you are busy taking off your shoes and throwing away your water bottles before getting in the airport security line, too many of the nation's ruling elites are ignoring the causes of Islamic terrorism, insisting that religion is only an afterthought among the jihadists. Moreover, they argue that where religion does play a role, it is minor one, and in any case, it's your fault, not theirs.

In the last several weeks, the debates over mosques near Ground Zero and the burning of Korans have refocused the attention of the public on those who abused their religion to slaughter Americans and to incite a war with the world's lone remaining superpower. At the same time, however, these same debates have refocused (as if it were ever out of focus) the attention of the ruling class on the shortcomings of said public and of the nation as a whole. The idea seems to be that if Americans were just better people, their problems would dissipate.

Typical of this species of commentary was the column published over the weekend by *The New York Times* and written by the Old Gray Lady's resident purveyor of conventional wisdom, Nicholas Kristof. Kristof, you see, thinks that the problem with the "war against terror" is the "war" bit. If we'd just learn to stop picking on Muslims, we'd all be better off, and they could stop killing us. Or something like that.

Actually, the focus of Kristof's column is the work done in Afghanistan by two very brave and very capable 9/11 widows, who have created a charitable organization designed specifically to aid Afghani widows. Unfortunately, Kristof, as is his wont, can't help but use these women as an excuse to attack the rest of us, insisting that this type of response to 9/11 is far more productive than "missiles, bombs, detentions, and waterboardings."

Among others, Kristof turns for enlightenment to Paul Barker, "who for many years ran CARE's operations in Afghanistan [and] believes America would have accomplished more there if our government had shared the two women's passion for education and development." "I can only wonder at what a different world it could be today," Kristof quotes Barker imagining, "if in those fateful months after 9/11 our nation's leadership had been guided more by a people-to-people vision of building both metaphorical and physical bridges."

And we can only wonder what a different world it could be today if, in those fateful months after 9/11, the Taliban hadn't housed, fêted, harbored, and refused to turn over Osama bin Laden, the murderer of some 3,000 Americans. "Education and employment," Kristof notes, "are not panaceas" and would not turn Afghanistan into a peaceful country. This is particularly so if educators are not allowed into the country by the Taliban; if women are not allowed to be educated, according to the law of the land as disseminated by Islamist regime; and if foreigners – Americans in particular – are considered invaders by said regime.

All of this is to say that this program is nice, and we admire the women who have worked so hard on behalf of their Afghani sisters, but the idea that such a project could have been undertaken without the missiles, bombs, detentions, and waterboarding, or that we could all have "unleashed our better angels" as Kristof envisions, is absurd beyond depiction. The problem with Afghanistan circa 2001 wasn't that it was poor and uneducated. THE PROBLEM WAS THAT THE COUNTRY WAS

RULED BY A MURDEROUS ISLAMIST CULT THAT NOT ONLY FUNDED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, BUT HARBORED GLOBAL JIHADISTS. That this is too difficult, apparently, for Kristof to grasp is hardly surprising. But it is disheartening, particularly since it represents the mindset that dominates among Kristof's colleagues – both in the media and on the political left.

The general theme of the day is, as *Newsweek's* Fareed Zakaria put it, that “America overreacted” to 9/11. Former “Nightline” host Ted Koppel goes one step further, insisting not only that America overreacted, but that this overreaction was precisely the response bin Laden et al. were hoping for. Al Qaeda, you see, was never very powerful, but was only made so by the dastardly Americans, who exacerbated the situation and created countless more jihadists by having the temerity to defend itself against attack.

We're not exactly sure how all of this jibes with the other theme of the day, namely that Americans are responsible for creating more jihadists, not by actually doing anything, but by thinking mean thoughts – specifically by questioning the wisdom of an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero or by thinking about expressing one's First Amendment rights to be a jackass and burn the Koran. On the one hand, these aren't the provocative actions of war. But on the other, clearly, Americans are inciting violence and proving themselves to be the real problem here. Seriously, Americans! If you can't stop thinking such nasty thoughts and exercising your own First Amendment prerogatives, how can we possibly blame the poor Muslim people of the world for being motivated to want to murder you and your family? Jeeze.

Now, don't get us wrong. We don't particularly enjoy the idea of anyone burning any book. And we don't think that needless and tactless displays of religious animosity are particularly enlightened.

But what does it say about a culture in which the head of the armed forces in Afghanistan, the Secretary of Defense, the FBI, and the President of the United States himself feel it necessary to declare publicly that

any act of stupid symbolic provocation can exacerbate the problems we have with Islamist terrorism and therefore make the risk of terrorist attack more likely. Whom, exactly, are these people blaming for the increased risk of terrorism? And equally important, who decides where the line between provocative expression and just plain old expression is to be drawn? The jihadists? Because that's what it sounds like to us.

The other question we have is what does it say about the head of the armed forces in Afghanistan, the Secretary of Defense, the FBI, and the President of the United States himself that they have such a low opinion of Muslims that they believe those Muslims can be turned from peace-loving flower children into murderous head-amputaters because of one stupid “reverend” in Florida and his 30 followers? These folks – and those in the media who have echoed their thoughts – accuse the people of this country of being Islamophobic. Yet they believe that Muslims are such emotionally unstable people that they can be set off by any little inanity? Who, exactly, has a lower opinion of the world's Muslims here?

All of this taken together – all of this ranting about the mosque and about the Koran burning, all of this insistence that peace, love, and understanding are a better way to win friends and influence people – points to one inevitable conclusion: America's ruling class continues to believe, nine years after the 9/11 attacks, that the Islamist terrorism problem is America's own damn fault. Now, none of them is stupid enough to go out, ala Jeremiah Wright, and rejoice in the chickens coming home to roost. But in a very real way, the members of the political and media elite think that Americans – and stupid, ignorant, right-wing Americans in particular – are responsible, if not for creating the Islamist terrorism problem, then at least for exacerbating it.

In our opinion, this will lead, heaven forbid, to two inevitable conclusions.

First, by focusing on America's and Americans' shortcomings in the battle against global jihadism, rather than on . . . well . . . global jihadism, this nation's

ruling class runs the very real and very serious risk of taking the wrong tack with regard to fighting this existential war. If our leaders decide – or worse yet, if they have decided already – that the key to winning this war is to fix ourselves rather than to fix the problem of global Islamist terrorism, then all of us are, to put it delicately, flipping screwed.

We know that the jihadists are desperate, after nine years of failure, to hit with a big attack again. And we know that they have tried and will certainly continue trying until they succeed. And we know that any attempt to focus on the shortcomings of ignorant Americans rather than on murderous terrorists will substantively increase the odds that the jihadists will succeed. How could it not?

We also know that by focusing on Americans and, in essence, blaming them for the inability of some Muslims worldwide to behave appropriately in civilized society, this nation's ruling class threatens to turn any backlash against another attack into a full-blown constitutional crisis.

Given the current level of animosity that exists between the ruling elites and their constituents, any terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11 (or worse) will, we're afraid, lead to political breakdown. This is particularly so given that the ruling class finds itself unable, in the face of beliefs that differ from its own, to muster any argument more sophisticated than, "Islam is a religion of Peace. And you better shut your mouth about it!"

Is this unfair? Absolutely. Blaming Michael Bloomberg or Barack Obama or Nicholas Kristof for an attack perpetrated by fringe religious radicals is every bit as unfair as blaming such an attack on the victims themselves.

But so what?

For starters, some in the ruling class will indeed blame any attack on the victims, insisting, again, that Americans brought it on themselves. Second, at least those who will blame their leaders for missing

the attack will wait for an attack to start pointing fingers, unlike said members of the ruling class, who have already begun doing so, preemptively. And finally, who ever said the world was fair? Leaders are supposed to lead. And they are supposed to figure out how to solve problems and keep their charges safe. And if they can't, or more nefariously, if they won't solve problems or even try to keep their charges safe because of blind adherence to politically correct prejudices, then those leaders will be punished accordingly.

What concerns us, naturally, is how they will be punished. We strongly suspect that a great many Americans will be unwilling to wait until the first Tuesday in November in the next even-numbered year to demonstrate their unhappiness. But how that unhappiness will, in fact, manifest itself is anyone's guess.

At the very least, we expect that there will be a strong public outcry to respond and to do so without the leavening effect of the public concern distinguishing between radical Islamists and regular Muslims. This, of course, would be tragic – most especially for those innocents abroad who might be caught up in an act of vengeance. In this sense, if none other, the ruling class is doing the overwhelming majority of the world's peaceful Muslims a grave disservice by focusing its critiques on peaceful dissenters at home rather than the violent dissenters overseas.

As we have noted before, "globally, it is estimated that a mere 5% of Muslims express a belief in the religious sanctification of violent jihad, yet that translates into roughly 80 million potentially violent extremists worldwide." That's a lot of jihadists to kill, capture, or convert. You'd think that our nation's elites would be more focused on doing so than on the crass publicity stunts of about thirty losers in Florida. But then, you'd be wrong.

All we can do, at this point, is hope that our luck continues to be good, and that those who are sent by the Islamists to attack us will continue to light up only their undies or forget to open up their propane tanks.

But if that luck doesn't hold, then things will get ugly quickly. All of which is to say that for the sake of innocent Americans, innocent Muslims worldwide, and the general political order, the ruling class had better pray that that luck holds.

We know we will.

WHO IS BARACK OBAMA?

We know that we are not breaking any new ground here when we say that Barack Obama is the most bizarre man ever elected to the presidency of these United States. No one knows exactly who he is, what he wants, or how he plans to accomplish his goals – whatever they are. He is, to paraphrase Churchill, a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an incredibly strange dude.

As we noted a couple of weeks back, the situation in which Obama currently finds himself – rapidly losing ground with the public and facing a midterm electoral rebuke – is not all that unusual. With the exceptions of the Georges Bush, every president in more than three decades has faced similar circumstances. But while his position may not be unique, Obama's response to it has been. In essence, he has told the American people: "You don't like what I'm doing? Well, too bad. I'm in charge, and I don't like what you're doing."

It is not at all clear whether this response is intentional or inadvertent and, relatedly, whether it is likely to persist or change. And yet, what he is likely to do is enormously important, to the nation, to the financial markets, and to millions of American citizens and millions of more illegals.

Obviously, we don't know the answer. But we have some thoughts. To wit:

To understand this guy and thus to anticipate what he might do next, we think it would be worthwhile to take a look at his political rise to power and the forces that propelled him upward to the presidency. Every president has a story and path that led him to the White House.

Obama's predecessor was propelled by family connections. Before him, Bill Clinton was propelled by all-consuming ambition – both his and his wife's – and by the skills honed in his youth in Hot Springs. George H.W. Bush, obviously, got into the family business. Ronald Reagan was moved by a lifetime of dedication to the principles of liberty and individualism. Jimmy was a moralist who wanted to share his moral certitude with the nation. Johnson was a bully, but was also the most accomplished legislator of his day. Etc. etc.

But what about Obama? What propelled him? What motivated him, exactly? And what had he done, prior to deciding to run for the presidency? The historian and classicist Victor Davis Hanson takes a look:

This is an old story with a long heritage. We know Obama got into Columbia; we have no idea what he accomplished there — or whether his undergraduate transcript merited admission to Harvard Law School. Obama may have charmed his way into Harvard Law Review, but in brilliant fashion he seems to have guessed rightly that once there he would be singularly exempt from the usual requirements of quantifiable achievement.

A part-time visiting law professorship at the University of Chicago Law school rarely leads to a permanent tenure-track position, much less a tenured billet— and never without a body of published articles and books. In Obama's case those protocols simply did not apply. He was not only offered whatever he wanted, but as Justice Kagan reminded us, Obama was courted by Harvard Law School as well.

Most candidates for state office do not sue to remove their opponents from the ballot. Obama petitioned (successfully) that most of them be disqualified in

1995. It is likewise rare for the sealed divorce records of a front-running primary rival to be mysteriously leaked, prompting a veritable uncontested nomination. But after Democratic rival Blair Hull imploded from such revelations, so did Obama's general election Republican opponent Jack Ryan, who dropped out of the race after his divorce proceedings were eerily likewise exposed. Lightning does strike twice in the same place for the blessed Obama.

Obama had served in the Senate for about two years, when he announced his candidacy for the presidency. That too is rare, but not unprecedented; what was singular was his claim that he was a bipartisan uniter, when, in fact, he compiled the most partisan voting record among 100 senators of either party. He sponsored no major legislation; his memoirs reflected others' interest in him, not his own record of lawmaking. His themes were winning over adherents rather signature accomplishments.

The exotic name, the mixed racial heritage, and the street cred cool, juxtaposed to the nerdy professorial sermonizing, trumped the need to author or repeal significant laws or create lasting community institutions — or to leave any footprint of achievement at either the University of Chicago, the Illinois legislature, or the U.S. Senate. Running for office or courting appointments or angling for promotions seemed divorced from worry about doing anything when such wishes were granted . . .

Add to this the fact that Obama, then a young nobody, was given a hefty advance — two, in fact — to write his autobiography. Later, he was paid handsomely as well to write a second autobiography, again despite not having accomplished much.

As any author can tell you, random advances for unpublished authors are rarities on the level of flying unicorns. Moreover, being sought out and begged to write — about oneself and one's lack of accomplishments, nonetheless -- is bizarre beyond description. For all of the angst and confusion Obama describes in his depiction of his adolescence, his adulthood has been filled with no such turmoil. He has floated from gig to gig, always and everywhere succeeding, despite never having any measures of success.

If we were conspiracy minded, we might worry that he had been propelled along this career path by nefarious forces, who made things easy for him, so as to ensure his ultimate victory. Maybe it was the far-left America-haters like Obama's original political patron William Ayers who decided that this guy should be president. Maybe the Chicago/Daley machine decided to put one of its own in power. Maybe it was the Soros-ites at MoveOn and the rest, who wanted a serious anti-Bush, anti-Western, anti-warrior in the Oval Office, manipulating things on their behalf. Maybe it was the Democratic political establishment, desperate for a racially mysterious candidate who was, nonetheless, "articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy," to quote then-Senator Joe Biden. Maybe it was the media types, who had had enough of fools and reactionaries like George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan and wanted someone who thought and sounded like themselves to run the show for a while. Or maybe it was just dumb luck.

Generally speaking, conspiracies have goals and puppets are pulled by strings. But this guy has accomplished none of his theoretical puppet masters' goals and appears not to be moved by strings at all. If there was a conspiracy to get this Manchurian Candidate elected to the presidency, it was pretty nebulous and diffuse. Moreover, it was pretty stupid. Hard to imagine who would have stood to gain from the presidency up to this point. Obama may, we guess, be a Manchurian Candidate of sorts. But we'll be damned if we can figure out who is playing the role of Manchuria.

What we suspect is more likely is that several players along the way thought they were contributing to the rise of a political puppet of some sort, but no one stayed interested long enough to want to be the puppet master. They all helped the kid out on his rise to the top, in other words, making the difficult appear easy, but no one stuck with him consistently and no one pushed him over the top. His rise was, in the end, merely a case of being in the right place at the right time or of simply “Being There” – which is to say that Obama is, as Hanson notes, the real-world version of Jerzey Kosinski’s *Chance the gardener/Chauncey Gardner*.

Of course, the one notable difference between Obama and *Chance the gardener* is that *Chance* knew he was a simpleton and didn’t think much more about the good fortune that befell him. Obama, by contrast, is likely the most self-absorbed president in the history of the nation, which is to say that he doesn’t appear to know that he is a beneficiary of fortune and thinks, instead, that his blessed luck is his own making.

Now, if we are right about this – and we suspect we are – then we can speculate a little bit about what it all means. For starters, the mess he is in is the result not of a misreading of the public’s mood, but of an intentional and deliberate dismissal of the public and its concerns. They are irrelevant. He is what matters. When they’ve accomplished what he’s accomplished, they can have a say. Until then, they would do well to shut up and wish they were as glorious and as breathtaking as he. Or as Hanson put it:

All that matters for the country is that the current president of the United States seems surprised that as our chief executive he is earning scrutiny not previously accorded him — and that

he finds that demand for accountability both exasperating and abjectly unfair. Thus this week’s latest “like a dog” whine.

For some reason, Obama believed that those who expected after his campaign promises a real upturn in the economy, or fiscal responsibility, or inspired foreign policy would be satisfied, as they had in the past, merely with soaring rhetoric and superficial reassurance. When they were not, and voiced such displeasure, as ingrates they had supposedly reduced Obama to canine-like status.

As we’ve noted countless times before, to Obama, the people are, as the old joke has it, revolting. They are insignificant and are therefore unworthy to criticize him. Who, after all, do they think they are?

The second thing that Obama’s attitude and history tell us, therefore, is that a dramatic move away from his current course and to something a little more politically palatable is highly unlikely. Barack Obama is not Bill Clinton, a man determined to hold power and to do whatever is necessary to do so. He is, rather, someone who is not particularly fond of the idea of changing anything for anyone’s benefit.

He is who he is. And that has always been enough. More than enough, in fact. And that’s the way it is.

Whether or not this portends a change in Congressional majority this November or a change in presidents two Novembers from now, we can’t say. But we can say, with fair certainty, that Obama’s success will depend on bending the public to his will. Certainly, it’s not going to work the other way around.

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