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THEY SAID IT

Whether we imagine a man, for instance, knowing in advance the day of his death and the situation it would find him in, or a people knowing in advance the century of its downfall, both pictures would bear within themselves as an inevitable consequence a confusion of all desire and endeavour. For desire and endeavour can only unfold freely when they live and act blindly, i.e., for their own sakes and in obedience to inward impulses. After all, the future is shaped only when that happens, and if it did not happen, the future life and end of that man or that people would be different. A future known in advance is an absurdity. Foreknowledge of the future, however, is not only undesirable, it is for us also unlikely. The main obstacle in the way is the confusion of insight by our wishes, hopes and fears; further, our ignorance of everything which we call latent forces, physical or mental, and the incalculable factor of mental contagions, which can suddenly transform the world.

Jacob Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History*, 1943.

In this Issue

Domestic Politics 2011:
Devolution, Collapse and More.

DOMESTIC POLITICS 2011: DEVOLUTION, COLLAPSE, AND MORE.

One of our favorite traditions here at The Political Forum is writing our first-of-the-year forecast pieces. We get the chance to try to predict the themes that will dominate the political scene over the next 365 days, fully aware that we will look like idiots if we are wrong and that no one will recognize that we are clairvoyant geniuses if we are right. But the entire exercise is good fun, is helpful to us because it forces us to unequivocate (and even coin a term now and then), and, hopefully, is helpful to you, gentle reader. So what could be better?

Unfortunately, this happy custom is inevitably accompanied by another, which is one of our least favorite traditions, namely writing the *%\$#%^&* introductions to these pieces. This is awkward and wearing. How does one say “predicting the future is difficult” without seeming like we’re whining? Still, we feel obliged to run the usual caveats, i.e. don’t take any of this too terribly seriously and please understand that these predictions are meant more as the foundations for discussion than actual attempts at prophetic utterances intended to presage the future. But then, you know all that by now, don’t you? All of which is to say that these intros are tedious and largely useless.

So on to the fun stuff....

Forecast #1: The much discussed “Obama Comeback” will die on the vine. Indeed, by this time next year, no one will remember the purported “comeback” at all, which will leave him looking exceptionally vulnerable heading into his re-election campaign.

Let’s get one thing straight before we continue: The Obama “comeback,” as described by the mainstream media, is a fiction; the hopeful yet fantastical pining of the President’s disappointed and discombobulated fan club. Their guy got his backside handed to him this year. And worse yet, he got it handed to him by a bunch of nobodies, political nonentities one and all. Obama was death to Democratic candidates, while some two-bit TV star from the TLC network who never even served a full term as governor of some frontier province, practically got a Republican House elected all by herself. And now the Speaker of the House is going to be some guy named John Boehner. Could there be anything more embarrassing?

To get a sense of the real impact of Obama’s “comeback,” we need to look, for just a moment, at what accomplishments have supposedly comprised this political resurrection.

First, of course, there was the extension of the Bush tax cuts. Let that sink in for a moment. Obama is, according to the chattering class, the comeback kid, in part, because he capitulated and signed an extension of the one piece of domestic legislation that both he and his leftist compatriots have, for years, called the greatest mistake and the greatest social-economic crime of the last quarter century. And he did this while his party still controlled the House and still had a near-super-majority in the Senate.

More to the point, he did so not because he wanted to or because he suddenly abandoned his lifelong dream of expropriating from the rich to give to the poor, but *because he was scared*. Barack Obama was scared that if the tax cuts were allowed to expire, it would hurt the economy and completely destroy his chances for re-election. Let us repeat that for emphasis: *Barack*

Obama was scared that if the tax cuts were allowed to expire, it would hurt the economy and completely destroy his chances for re-election.

As more than one observer has noted, whether Obama knows this or not, what this means, in essence, is that he has conceded the two most critical first principles of supply-side doctrine, namely that taxes on the margin affect behavior, and that increasing those taxes will affect economic behavior negatively.

Now, every economist worth his or her salt has known this forever. And Obama’s own former Chairman of the National Council of Economic Advisors, Christina Romer, has, along with her husband, constructed the definitive database proving this fairly conclusively.

But the Democratic establishment has always denied either possibility. Until now. And Obama gave the game away.

Letting taxes rise at this point in the economic cycle was too risky for Obama to chance. So he gave up.

The second of Obama’s big comeback victories was the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which should allow openly gay individuals to serve in the military. All we need to say here, we think, is that this policy that Obama “fought” so hard to get abolished was formulated, shepherded through Congress, and signed *by Bill Clinton*.

The third alleged victory, the New Start treaty, is...well...it was . . . mmm . . . errr . . . something, we guess. Truth be told, we don’t really care enough about this thing to waste much time on it. Obama gave the Rooskies a good deal. The Senate grouched about it. Obama made some promises to Congress. And, in the end, everything turned out . . . wait, wait, wait a minute! Did we type that right? “The Rooskies?” Obama signs a treaty with a country that really doesn’t represent an overt threat to us (at least not because of its own weapons) and hasn’t represented an overt threat to us in nearly two decades, and we’re supposed to care? Really? And the

electorate is supposed to notice? Color us skeptical. When he does something important about Iran, or China, or even Venezuela, call us. Until then, well . . .

And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen, Obama's comeback: an irrelevant treaty with an irrelevant country that most voters will never know about; the continuance of a Bush policy; and the repudiation of a Clinton policy. Oh my. Obama's friends, fans, and media skills can call this anything they want, but we can think of at least twenty words that would make more sense than "comeback." Whatever you call it, the notion that it gives the guy "momentum" carrying into the new year is laughable.

Forecast #2: Obama will not "pull a Clinton" and run to the center, triangulating his way to re-election. Or at least he will not do so successfully.

Back in the '90s, we used to complain that one of the things we hated about Bill Clinton was that he was too politically malleable, that he would shift position with the winds of politics, that he really didn't believe in anything.

We miss those days.

Today, we again have a Democratic president, but one who, unlike Clinton, actually does believe in something. And what he believes in is the power of the state to promote social equality and manage the lives of its "charges." The failure of the Western welfare state – as evidenced by the ongoing collapse in Europe – does not faze the man, so deeply does he hold his beliefs. He knows what he knows and wants what he wants, everything else be damned. Even if that "everything" is what is left of the greatness of the nation he is supposedly in charge of defending.

What this means, in practice, is that Obama will not be able to pull a Clinton. He won't be able to abandon the principles on which he was first elected and in which he believes in favor of more politically palatable ones. He will not triangulate. He can't do it. He hates the right. He hates everything it stands for. He has

hated it, quite literally, from birth. Mother's milk, if you will. He will never bring himself to compromise with those whose views he hates, or at least not enough to successfully "triangulate."

Recall, if you will the President's behavior at the news conference at which he announced the tax-cut-compromise. He called his partners in the compromise – the Republicans – "hostage-takers" and sneered at them openly. The idea that he could repeat that scene over and over again for most of the next two years and could get better at it is implausible at the very least.

Now, Obama may try to simulate compromise at points during the next Congress, but he won't do so convincingly. And more to the point, he won't do so earnestly.

Which brings us to . . .

Forecast #3: For the remainder of the Obama presidency – be that two or six years – the nation will be governed not by its elected representatives, but by its un-elected bureaucrats, the foot-soldiers of the administrative state.

We have written recently that the inevitability of the administrative state is now in question. The rise of the Tea Party and the informational leveling afforded by extraordinary developments in technology – two intimately related phenomena – have ensured that the administrative state will not be able to take complete and incontestable control of the day-to-day governance of the nation without at least some significant pushback. (And for the record, this is precisely why the statist-heavy FCC now wishes to regulate the internet.)

Be that as it may, the administrative state will not go down without a fight, if it even goes down at all. And 2010 will be the year that this "fight" begins in earnest.

Already, we have seen the Obama administration's willingness to bypass the will of the people, as expressed by their elected representatives, on at least two counts.

As most of you know by now, the health care debate's "death panels" are back, only this time they've been advanced administratively and furtively, which only makes sense since the *Democratically controlled* Congress rejected them last time. As countless commentators have noted, this issue was badly handled, badly distorted, and wildly exaggerated last year. But that's not the point. The point is that it was also overtly rejected. But now it's been resurrected – for better or worse – by an administration and a bureaucratic apparatus that are both incapable of taking no for an answer.

Of course, the real administrative power grab is taking place at the Environmental Protection Agency, which has been directed to ignore the Congressional rejection of carbon rationing and to engage in its own efforts to regulate "pollutants" such as that which you and we exhale when we breathe.

The Obama administration insists that it will move slowly, cautiously, and reasonably as it draws up plans to regulate carbon dioxide emissions. But, again, color us skeptical. As the *New York Times* put it over the weekend:

The environmental agency estimates that only 400 such facilities will be affected in each of the first few years of the program. Over the next decade, however, the agency plans to regulate virtually all sources of greenhouse gases, imposing efficiency and emissions requirements on nearly every industry and every region.

Did you catch that? "The agency plans to regulate virtually all sources of greenhouse gases . . ." That's you. That's we. That's the cows that prowl the Melcher ranch in the Shenandoah Valley. That's everyone and everything. Over the next decade. And that, of course, is the point of environmental regulation. Is there anything that isn't part of the environment? Is there anything, therefore, that can't be regulated?

Not that it matters much, but it is precisely this kind of micromanagement of the nation, its people, and its economy that the most liberal Congress in at least a quarter century rejected. Of course, to the administrative state and its advocates, the people and their representatives are mere speed bumps on the highway of governance.

Forecast #4: The people will continue to rebel against this administrative state and continue to voice and demonstrate their anger with and contempt for Washington.

This, of course, is the great thorn in Barack Obama's side, the fact that the people in this country have a say in how they are governed. Like all leftists and a great many right-leaning statistes as well, Obama is a Gnostic. He has it all figured out. He knows the secret of how to make things work. He knows how things should be and how they should be done. He knows, in short, where "there" is and how to get "there" from here. But he has a problem. The people.

The people of this great land neither agree that "there" is where Obama says it is nor are willing to allow him to take them "there" anyway. And if the American people proved anything over the last two years, it is that they will fight, however they can, to prevent being dragged somewhere they don't want to go, no matter how beautiful, articulate, mellifluous, or well dressed their "dragger" may be.

Though someone apparently forgot to tell the folks at *Time* Magazine and the rest of the mainstream press, the Tea Partier was the person of the year in 2010. And he (or, in perhaps a majority of cases, she) will be so again in 2011.

The folks in the media and the political establishment like to whine. And specifically, they like to whine about how "uninformed" the American people are. And while we won't argue the broad point that Americans as a whole are ill-informed about politics, we will argue that those who are interested in politics, which is a significant minority, are far better informed today than they ever have been before. And they are

using the information to which they now have access to make life harder for the ruling class.

The proliferation of alternative media – talk radio, Fox News, internet news sites, and especially blogs – have served the people of this country well, or at least those people who care to take advantage of that which the ruling class would rather they not see (which again is precisely why the statist-heavy FCC now wishes to regulate the internet).

Now, we'll concede that not everything on the internet is true (GASP!). And we'll also concede that political partisans have an interest in presenting half-truths and near-truths as real truths, thereby confusing some issues and some people who are interested in those issues.

But anyone who tells you that more information more widely available is a bad thing is trying to protect some privileged position – be it in government, entertainment, or the traditional media.

In any case, information is available. People are upset. And all of this combines to create a dangerous brew. Washington has been put on notice. The people are watching. And they expect something different. Whether or not they will get it remains to be seen.

And that, naturally, brings us to . . .

Forecast #5: The new Republican House and more-Republican Senate will, sadly, disappoint their anti-establishment supporters.

To be honest, we're actually of two minds on this subject. Part of us knows that Washington is a dangerous place for "reformers," and that many great men and women have fallen prey to that succubus's wiles. We were, at one point, inclined simply to say that the new Republicans would become just like the old Republicans, which is to say just like the Democrats. Or to borrow an account of the progression from Frank J. Fleming:

On the 3rd, the new Republican majority will take over the House. On the 4th, they will go back to business as usual

and be declared a failure and a betrayal to true conservative principles. On the 5th, most of the GOP will be unmasked as actually being Democrats in disguise. Blast! They fooled us again!

Fortunately, the other part of us actually thinks that at least some good will come from having more and more conservative Republicans on the Hill. We're not sure what good or how much of it. But some is better than none, right?

Over the next several months, the Republicans – particularly those in the House, but a handful in the Senate – will make things more difficult for the spendthrift establishment types in Washington. They'll protest the President's budget. They'll raise a stink about increasing the debt limit. They'll make it hard to pass *last year's* appropriations bills when the current continuing resolution expires. In short, they will put up a good fight, make strong, persuasive, and important arguments.

And in the end, we believe, they will capitulate.

Generally speaking, governments do not make significant budget reforms until they are forced to, which is to say that the U.S. government will not truly pare back its spending unless or until our old friend Ed Yardeni's bond vigilantes make it do so. And right now, the bond vigilantes remain reluctant to move – at least against the federal government.

All of this is to say that on the issues that matter most, the new Republican House will have a difficult time meeting expectations. It may well pass a repeal of Obamacare. It may well vote to defund Obamacare. It may well try to cut the budget. But it will do all of those things secure in the knowledge that the Senate will not play along and, even if it did, Obama would wield his veto pen.

Add all of that to the fact that many in the respective Republican conferences – guys like South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham – still don't understand what the gol-derned Tea Partiers were upset about and still

believe that we need to regulate carbon emissions and the like, and it is pretty clear, to us at least, that the Republicans will not succeed in reigning in Washington. Too many still favor power over progress and too many still don't believe that Washington needs reigning in. And they will complicate even the most Herculean efforts on the part of the true believers.

Given this, you can expect that . . .

Forecast #6: The real "action" on the political scene will, for the first time in decades, take place away from Washington, in the states and the municipalities.

This, sadly, is a double-edged sword, part good, part bad.

To start with, though, we think that the most pleasant yet least discussed aspect of last November's midterm election was the progress made at the state and local levels by actual bona fide conservatives. Republicans picked up more seats in state legislatures than at any point in nearly a century. Sure, they beat the Democrats at the federal level; but they demolished them at the state and local levels. And for conservatives, this is good news.

For starters, the state legislatures have always been the proving ground for the federal legislature, and the governors' mansions have almost always been the proving ground for the White House. Good, smart, strong, solid conservatives have been elected to these positions, which augurs well for the long-term future.

At the same time, it augurs especially well for the near term. As we have argued for years now, the real battle for the soul of the nation takes place far away from Washington, which is merely where the score is kept. Never – or at least not in a long time – has this maxim of ours been more true.

Over the next year (and several to follow), the states and municipalities will do much to decide the future of the nation. States like Arizona set the tone last year, insisting, among other things, that the federal government's laws be enforced. This year, a number

of conservative states – and Texas in particular – will follow suit in challenging the federal government's enduring expansion. Already, Texas has declared that it will not enforce any undemocratically enacted regulations on carbon emissions and it has convinced a federal appeals court to block the EPA from enforcing any such regulations in Texas, at least for the time being. Immigration and health care "reform," obviously, have also caused great and growing rifts between the states and the federal government. And we expect the list of issues over which the states are upset to continue to expand.

Randy Barnett, a constitutional law professor at Georgetown University, has recently used his position as an educator, blogger, and op-ed columnist to advocate in support of legislation introduced this past Congressional session by Congressman Robert Bishop of Utah. This legislation – actually a constitutional amendment – is known simply as "The Repeal Amendment" and reads as follows:

Any provision of law or regulation of the United States may be repealed by the several states, and such repeal shall be effective when the legislatures of two-thirds of the several states approve resolutions for this purpose that particularly describe the same provision or provisions of law or regulation to be repealed.

Obviously, even if such an amendment were ever to pass, it would not do so this year. That said, we expect the effort which this amendment symbolizes and summarizes – the reassertion of states' rights – to take on greater urgency over the next year.

The reason for this increased urgency, of course, is the other reason why the states and municipalities will be where the "action" is this year.

It's hard to say which states, which municipalities, or even how many, but a great many state and local governments will approach or arrive at fiscal crisis points over the next twelve months. Some

– municipalities presumably – will default. Some will use the opportunity to cut unnecessary spending. But others – and presumably the majority, possibly including states like California, New York, and Illinois – will seek to have the federal government save them from having to live within their means, which is to say that they will seek to have the federal government take from the more responsible states, municipalities, and individuals and give to profligate. This will end badly.

By all rights, the politics in question should be compelled to default, which is the only legal means by which they would be able to unload some of their crushing pension burdens. But they won't be allowed to default. At least not all of those that should.

The reasons for this are many, but two stand out. First, a state default would be unprecedented and quite complicated. No one knows for sure how it would happen, how it would play out, or what the ultimate result would be.

Second, and more to the point, there are political forces in this country that are dedicated to the proposition that public employees should not have to settle for anything less than that which their union negotiators were able to extract from the polity on their behalf. And currently, those “forces” occupy the White House and a majority of the Senate.

With the gradual but enduring putrefaction of private-sector unionism in this country, the party of Labor, i.e. the Democratic Party, has come to rely more and more on the contributions, support, and overt demagoguery provided to it by public-sector unions. In the 2008 and 2010 election cycles, AFSCME (The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees) became one of largest players in Democratic politics, perhaps the largest player of them all. Certainly, this past year it was the largest outside contributor to the campaign – wailing and gnashing of teeth over corporate donations, notwithstanding. And now there is payback to be had.

Please note that some form of payback has already been paid, in the form of aid to states and municipalities in the 2009 stimulus bill. When the

Obama administration talks about jobs “saved” by the stimulus, they mean public-sector union jobs. Of course, that payback merely put off the inevitable, and did little to alleviate the real crisis in state and local finances, pension obligations.

Which means, as we have been warning for the better part of a year now, the war over limited funds is swiftly approaching, and you'd best prepare yourself for the consequences. And among those consequences, you should...

Forecast #7: Prepare for the snow and the garbage to pile up on your streets and near your homes, metaphorically, if not literally.

Those of you who live or work in and around New York City – and we'd estimate that you comprise probably half of our readership – should understand what we mean by this. After the Christmas weekend snowstorm, the city's streets remained unplowed for days. And even after the plowing was, by and large, completed, garbage began piling up on the streets as sanitation crews – the same people responsible for the plowing – were unable to remove the city's refuse on schedule. Memories of David Dinkins gripped the city.

And why did all of this occur? Well, that's the best (or worst) part (depending on one's perspective). The city's sanitation union leaders were, according to multiple sources, upset about budget cuts. So they threw a fit. Here are three reports on the fit, all three from the nation's “newspaper of record” (*The New York Post*, HA!), detailing the union's efforts:

Here's the effort in brief:

These garbage men really stink.

Selfish Sanitation Department bosses from the snow-slammed outer boroughs ordered their drivers to snarl the blizzard cleanup to protest budget cuts -- a disastrous move that turned streets into a minefield for emergency-services vehicles, *The Post* has learned.

Miles of roads stretching from as north as Whitestone, Queens, to the south shore of Staten Island still remained treacherously unplowed last night because of the shameless job action, several sources and a city lawmaker said, which was over a raft of demotions, attrition and budget cuts.

“They sent a message to the rest of the city that these particular labor issues are more important,” said City Councilman Dan Halloran (R-Queens), who was visited yesterday by a group of guilt-ridden sanitation workers who confessed the shameless plot.

Here’s what supervisors were doing:

Instead of plowing, they got plowed.

A group of on-duty Sanitation supervisors is under investigation for allegedly buying booze and chilling in their cozy department car for hours Monday night after the blizzard stranded a bus and three snowplows blocks away.

The city Department of Investigation is probing the incident after witnesses said four snow blowers blew off their duties to get blitzed, buying two six-packs of beer from a Brooklyn bodega. The workers then walked five blocks to their car, which was in 20 inches of snow in the middle of 18th at McDonald avenues near the F train entrance, passing the stuck bus and idle plows on 18th Avenue between Third and Fourth streets.

The four remained in the idling sedan until morning – then told their bosses they could do nothing about the blizzard because they had run out of gas, one witness said.

“They just sat in their car all night with the heat running,” the witness said.

And here’s what some of the rank-and-file were doing:

It was a real snow job.

Between 660 and 720 Sanitation workers called in sick for the cleanup of last week’s blizzard – more than double the usual rate, *The Post* has learned.

About 11 to 12 percent of the Sanitation Department’s 6,000-strong force didn’t show up for work on Monday or Tuesday, city officials confirmed, as 20 inches of snow brought the Apple to a near-standstill.

This is good stuff. And with apologies to those of you who have suffered and will continue to suffer because of the NYC sanitation department’s fecklessness, we are eternally grateful that this happened and that it was so blatantly obvious why it happened.

As we said above, we have been warning about and discussing this “war” over resources for some time. But we never figured we’d be able to point to such an obvious, clear-cut and illustrative example of the form that this war will take. Most union slowdowns, particularly among dedicated public servants will either never materialize or will never make it down to the rank-and-file, largely because those who pick such professions – police officers, firemen, teachers – are almost always quite dedicated to their jobs and to those whom they serve, and certainly are likely to be more dedicated than their out-of-touch union reps. All of which is to say that most reprisals on the part of unhappy union bigwigs are likely to be far more subtle than was “Snowplowgate” and therefore, far less helpful to us in making our point.

That’s not to say that reprisals won’t happen. They will. Mark our words. This is a war, after all, and victory in this war, like all wars, is what both sides seek. But rarely will the impact of the war be so obvious.

If you ask us – and by virtue of reading this, you sort of did – these last few predictions, those involving the devolution of political action from Washington to the states and the municipalities, are the most important of this year's forecasts. The reemergence of federalism as a serious political force is something that conservatives have been clamoring about for years. And it will certainly make the lives of all of us and the jobs of those of us at The Political Forum exceptionally interesting.

Before we quit for the week, though, we'd like to go back to the federal scene, in order to offer up our black swan-esque...

Out of Left Field Prediction; Forecast #8: The Democrats will see at least one and maybe many defections that will seriously hurt their cause, their credibility, and perhaps even Obama's re-election chances.

Longtime readers know that we tend to disagree with the conventional wisdom on the notion that *the far left wing* of the Democratic Party might abandon Obama, particularly as he readies for re-election. For it is the centrist, Southern-Democrat, Scots-Irish wing of the party that has been most neglected and that has most often defected to the other side. And while the chattering class and the party big shots are worried about staving off rebellion on Obama's left, we think their efforts would be put to much better use on his right, among those people who made Bill Clinton president twice and who defected to the GOP and elected a Republican House this past November.

Indeed, we expect a serious defection on Obama's right wing that could well cripple him and, at the very least, would challenge the narrative that the party has been constructing since its 2006 Congressional takeover.

Again, longtime readers will recognize that the defector we have in mind here is Virginia Senator Jim Webb, a Marine, a Navy Secretary under Reagan, a historian of the Scots-Irish/working-class people, and a recent convert from Republicanism. Webb was supposed to represent the new Democratic party – big tent,

pragmatic, military-friendly, and domestically populist. He won Virginia in 2006, beating incumbent and presumed presidential aspirant George Allen, and offered the promise of turning his erstwhile solid-red home state purple or, perhaps, even blue. Obama won Virginia in 2008 – the first Democrat to do so since Johnson – and the narrative looked as if it were taking hold.

And then Obama took office.

Since then, the narrative has fallen apart, as has the new Democratic coalition that Webb and “purple” Virginia were supposed to represent. And now Webb himself faces a choice.

He could challenge Obama for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. He could leave the party altogether and run for president as an independent. He could simply decline to run for re-election in 2012. Or he could swallow his pride, his values, and his principles and run for re-election as a proud Democrat.

Of these four, it strikes us that the third choice – simply quitting politics – might be the most likely. After all, he is all but certain to face George Allen again in his re-election bid, this time under far less favorable national circumstances and with Allen unlikely to repeat the kinds of mistakes that cost him last time around (“Macaca,” for example.)

If we are right, and Webb retires after one term, the Democratic Party will be dealt a severe blow, though one it will never admit. The Scots-Irish working class has been the backbone of Democratic politics – indeed, of American politics – for nearly two centuries, since at least the presidency of Andrew Jackson (hence the synonymous term “Jacksonian” Democrats). If Webb, the standard bearer of the Scots-Irish and the representative of the new Democratic outreach to these erstwhile conservatives, leaves the party or leaves politics altogether, he will likely not do so alone. He will take others with him.

What this will mean in practice is the collapse of Democratic aspirations among the Jacksonians. And this, in turn, would mean the ultimate and final collapse of the Roosevelt coalition.

Needless to say, this would be bad news for a party already beset by bad news. And it would, we think, alter the entire complexion of the 2012 campaign.

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