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## THEY SAID IT

For it is not always when things are going from bad to worse that revolutions breakout. On the contrary, it oftener happens that when an oppressive rule over a long period without protest suddenly finds the government relaxing its pressure it takes up arms against it. Thus the social order overthrown by a revolution is almost always better than one immediately preceding it, and experience teaches us that generally speaking the most perilous moment for a bad government is when it seeks to mend its ways. Patiently endured so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men's minds.

Alexis de Toqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, 1856.

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## MAKE THE WORLD GO AWAY.

Sometimes, you almost have to feel sorry for ol' Barack Obama. Just when the guy is getting into the swing of things; just when he is rocking and rolling on his agenda again; just when he is getting his oft-discussed and much-ballyhooed mojo back and beginning his slow jog toward re-election and unfettered transformation of the nation, the world goes and sticks its big, stupid nose in his business and expects him to do something, or say something, or at least look like he knows how to do or say something. How fair is that?

After all, he didn't sign on to be President of the World. That was the last guy; the mush-mouthed Texas cowboy. Obama signed on to be President of these here United (and soon-to-be Europeanized) States of America. The rest of the world can take care of itself, can't it? Why should he have to bother with it when he has other, far more important things to manage, like green technology, really fast trains, keeping the evil oil companies from drilling in Gulf of Mexico, and civil discourse?

Unfortunately for the President, it turns out that that's not the way it works. And unfortunately for us – and the rest of the world – it turns out that he does not appear to understand that, despite the fact that this isn't the first time that something like this has happened.

You may recall that it was back in June, 2009 when Obama and his Democratic allies were too busy selling their soon-to-be-reviled health care reform package to be bothered with the fraudulent presidential election and subsequent protests in Iran. The people of Iran were unhappy about the stolen election and the Mullahs' callous indifference to their will. They finally said "Enough already!" and took to the streets demanding democracy, or at least an end to the Mullahcracy.

Obama and his brain trust, who one assumes grew up singing left-wing labor union songs such as “Which Side Are You On Boys?,” apparently couldn’t decide which side they were on in this fight. Indeed, it seemed never to have occurred to them that they might want to give at least moral support to the enemies of their enemy, namely the nuclear provocateurs Ali Hoseini-Khamenei and his side-kick Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

So they hemmed. They hawed. They hesitated. They shuffled their feet and looked at their shoes. They offered only tepid support for the protestors, and declared, in essence, that they didn’t care which side eventually came out on top in this “internal matter” and that they would be more than happy to deal with whichever party emerged victorious. In short, they did nothing. And nothing is what they got in return. Eventually, the regime cracked down, killing scores, arresting hundreds, and beating thousands. The rest, as they say, is history. Sad, pathetic, embarrassing history.

Now it’s happening again. And again Obama seems annoyed that the world would dare to intrude upon his presidency. He has things to do. Don’t they get this? Don’t they understand that their little life-and-death struggles, their little quests for freedom and liberty and dignity and human rights really aren’t that important in the grand scheme of things? What is wrong with those people?

To start the week, Obama sent out his Secretary of State – a woman whose principal qualification for the job, you may recall, was that she was once married to a president – to call the Mubarak regime in Egypt “stable” and to do her best imitation of Kevin Bacon at the end of “Animal House,” who screamed “All is well!” and “Remain calm!” until the mob ran over him.

Shortly thereafter, Obama sent out his Vice President – a man whose principal qualification for his job was. . . well . . . ummm . . . something, we suppose – who declared that Mubarak is not a dictator and that he should not give up power. We imagine that came as a relief to Mubarak’s political prisoners and

to the widows of those he’s had killed over his three-decades-long rule. They were probably worried, but now feel better.

On Friday, Obama finally decided that perhaps he had better make some statement of his own, and so he did, telling everyone involved to be nice to each other, or something like that. Actually, what he said was that Mubarak had better watch himself, had better respond to the demands of the protestors, and had better not get too cute with his military, which gets over \$1 billion a year in spending money from good ol’ Uncle Sam.

That was, comparatively speaking, tough talk from this administration, which would rather teach the world to sing than to behave itself. But it was too little, too late, and it fell on deaf ears, certainly among protestors and probably with Mubarak. Not that it mattered to America’s intrepid president, who, while Egypt continued to burn, spent Saturday morning watching his daughter play basketball and Saturday night at a going-away party for his one-man brain trust, David Axelrod, who is going off to make plans for the exciting Obama-Biden reelection campaign.

Now obviously, no one knows at this point how the Egyptian “revolution” will play out. Indeed, between the time when these words were written and when you read them, the situation on the ground in Cairo may have changed two, perhaps three times already. That’s the nature of the beast. It is exceptionally fast, and exceptionally unpredictable. And the American President, unfortunately, is exceptionally slow-footed, except when he’s playing basketball.

We would like very much to believe that Obama is finally on the job and that our pessimism is just our personal bias talking, that because we are inclined to dislike Obama and his policies we are inclined to blame him when things go wrong. But we don’t think that is the case this time, much as we wish it were. The *New York Times* reported the following from Cairo on Saturday:

“Oh Mubarak, oh [Vice President-designate Omar] Suleiman, we have heard that before,” they chanted.

“Neither Mubarak nor Suleiman — both are stooges of the Americans.”

Many of the protesters were critical of the United States and complained about American government support for Mr. Mubarak or expressed disappointment with President Obama. But either because of Mr. Obama’s Muslim family history or because of his much-publicized speech here at the start of his presidency, many of the protesters expressed their criticism by telling American journalists that they had something to tell the president, directly.

“I want to send a message to President Obama,” said Mohamed el-Mesry, a middle-aged professional. “I call on President Obama, at least in his statements, to be in solidarity with the Egyptian people and freedom, truly like he says.”

Sadly, that would be the best news all weekend. *The Jerusalem Post* followed up with this report on Sunday:

During the main protest on Sunday in downtown Cairo, one man painted a 20-meter long message in flowing Arabic cursive that echoed across the square: “Go Away Mubarak, you are from the Americans, and you’re working for them!” . . .

“The USA does not support democracy, they’re supporting Israel, which is like their baby,” said Ahmed, a 26-year-old Cairo resident. “They think Egypt is functional because it’s in favor of their considerations.” . . .

Demonstrators are relying on the foreign press to get their message to Obama. “Isn’t this democracy?” they asked me over and over when I said I was a

journalist from America, incredulous that the country held as the pinnacle of world democracy could ignore such widespread popular sentiment.

“Obama has to be on our side, where is your democracy?” asked Osam L, who works at a foreign bank in Cairo. “You say Arabs are just donkeys, but the USA is supporting the system, not the people.”

We’d joke about how this must be that “smart diplomacy” we were told to expect from the Obama team, but we’re not so sure we’re in much of a joking mood. After all, this is very real and very serious business.

The fact of the matter is that there appear to be two sides forming in this clash. On the one side is Mubarak, who is supported in his efforts by the forces of the status quo, the forces of repression, the forces of stagnation, violence, and tyranny. Included among the combatants on this side is, naturally, Saudi King Abdullah. As the *International Business Times* reports:

Saudi Arabia’s state news agency reported that King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud criticized the protestors (claiming they are instigated by “infiltrators”) and strongly backed Mubarak.

The king said protesters were “exploited to spew out their hatred in destruction . . . inciting a malicious sedition” and that outside agitators “infiltrated into the brotherly people of Egypt, to destabilize its security.”

“No Arab or Muslim can tolerate any meddling in the security and stability of Arab and Muslim Egypt by those who infiltrated the people in the name of freedom of expression, exploiting it to inject their destructive hatred,” King Abdullah was quoted as saying.

“As they condemn this, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its people and government declares it stands with all its resources with the government of Egypt and its people,” the Saudi agency added.

On the other side are the Egyptian people, who are the *de facto* forces of liberty, freedom, and emancipation. Unfortunately, by definition, any opposition movement in Egypt is also going to be represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, the radical Islamist organization that, for all intents and purposes, started it all – and by “it,” we mean the modern, political Islamist movement.

The Brotherhood serves, among other things, as the spiritual forerunner to Hamas in the Palestinian territories and the intellectual progenitor of Al Qaeda. As much as the media may downplay its radical roots and insist that the Brotherhood is “peaceful” and non-terrorist, the truth is that the organization remains the equivalent in this nascent revolution to the Khomeinists in 1979’s Iranian Revolution.

And speaking of the Khomeinists . . . the vacuum created by the Obama administration’s hesitation on the question of Egyptian liberation was filled last week by the Iranian regime, which compared the Egyptian protestors to their own revolutionaries – not the ones from 18 months ago, mind you, but the ones from three decades ago. The Mad Mullahs and their figurehead president, Ahmadinejad, have vocally and aggressively supported the protests against Mubarak, declaring their willingness to aid a new, Islamist regime and repeatedly invoking similarities to their own Islamist takeover.

So the Saudis support the dictator. The Mad Mullahs support the Muslim Brotherhood. And what part do the Americans play in this drama? Sadly, the Iranians may not be too far off, which is to say that if history is any guide, the Americans might be who they have been before, hopeless and helpless wafflers and would-be do-gooders with nary a clue about what they are doing or should be doing.

You see, almost exactly thirty-two years ago, the Iranian people welcomed home the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had spent 15 years in exile, 14 in Najaf, Iraq and four months in Paris. Khomeini, of course, returned with the blessing of then-American President Jimmy Carter, who had been slow-footedly watching America’s ally, the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, deal with civil unrest and had begun belatedly pressuring him to make reforms and to restrain his repression of the people’s uprising. As Abraham Miller, an emeritus professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati and an expert on terrorism, recently put it:

The scene [in Egypt] is all too reminiscent of the Iranian revolution of 1979. Then, President Jimmy Carter not only demanded restraint but also had his administration work behind the scenes to bring down the shah. Carter believed he was watching a democratic revolution unfold, one led by Mehdi Bazargan, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh and Abulhassan Banisadr. Neither Carter nor his advisers understood that this democratic-centrist revolution, like those in Europe, would be short-lived. Bazargan resigned from the government over its authoritarian turn; Ghotbzadeh was shot by a firing squad; and Banisadr fled to France, where he currently lives under heavy police protection.

Way back when, about the time that Obama clinched the Democratic presidential nomination, a great many of his detractors began to warn that he would be Jimmy Carter, reborn. The law professor, author, and blogger Glenn Reynolds, aka Instapundit, suggested perhaps, when all was said and done, that Carter would be the best-case scenario for Obama. It’s beginning to look as if Reynolds may have the better of the argument. Certainly, there are those in a position to know who are beginning, at least, to suspect as much. Take, for example, the left-wing Israeli daily *Haaretz*:

Jimmy Carter will go down in American history as “the president who lost Iran,” which during his term went from being a major strategic ally of the United States to being the revolutionary Islamic Republic. Barack Obama will be remembered as the president who “lost” Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt, and during whose tenure America’s alliances in the Middle East crumbled.

The superficial circumstances are similar. In both cases, a United States in financial crisis and after failed wars loses global influence under a leftist president whose good intentions are interpreted abroad as expressions of weakness. The results are reflected in the fall of regimes that were dependent on their relationship with Washington for survival, or in a change in their orientation, as with Ankara.

America’s general weakness clearly affects its friends. But unlike Carter, who preached human rights even when it hurt allies, Obama sat on the fence and exercised caution. He neither embraced despised leaders nor evangelized for political freedom, for fear of undermining stability.

The irony in all of this, of course, is that the one American leader who did “evangelize political freedom” and who did pressure Mubarak and who did try to force the Egyptians to mend their ways before the so-called “Arab Street” exploded on them was George W. Bush. And, as you may recall, both the current president and his predecessor as the Democratic presidential nominee distinguished themselves in their runs for the White House as “not George Bush” and little more.

If you want to feel a little remorseful about the current state of American foreign affairs, then you might want to do a little comparative listening. Spend a few minutes listening to then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s 2005 speech in Cairo and a few

minutes listening to Barack Obama’s 2009 speech in Cairo. Rice, taking her cues from her boss, talks about freedom. She excoriates Mubarak and demands that the Arab world acknowledge the new realities on display in Iraq, the realities of liberty, individual choice, and human dignity. Obama, by contrast and as is his wont, talks about himself.

Three years ago, the Democratic primary voters decided that they would nominate for president a community organizer and part-time law lecturer who had never held a job for more than a few years and whose only foreign policy experience was to have memorized a bunch of leftist shibboleths about the imperialistic evils of capitalism.

This lack of experience, they insisted, would not be an issue, since he would bring hope and change, and most importantly, be someone other than George Bush.

It is possible, of course, that Obama is taking the right side now and saying some smart things. But he is unquestionably late to the party. And there is a very real risk here that by initially misreading the severity of the situation and by supporting, then abandoning Mubarak, he not only looks weak, but comes off as blundering and mercenary. And as best we can tell, the only thing worse than a “weak horse” in the Middle East is a lame horse ridden by a cheater.

If Obama were ever going to make a difference in Egypt, then the time to make that difference would have been January, 2009, not January, 2011. Today, the guy really is damned if he does, damned if he doesn’t. But that’s only because he insisted, at the start of his presidency, that he didn’t care about his predecessor’s democracy agenda, didn’t care about foreign policy anywhere near as much as he did domestic policy, and thought that the poor primitive souls of the Muslim world would be so impressed by his middle name, his father’s religion, and his leftist *bona fides* that they wouldn’t care what he did or didn’t do and would instinctively see him as an ally. Funny how that’s not the way the real world works. Funny how a man with so little experience wouldn’t know that. Funny how a man with such an inflated image of himself wouldn’t have any clue what he was getting himself into. Funny

how those who warned that zero experience plus enormous ego would lead to disaster were dismissed as crackpots and racists.

Now, of course, there is almost no chance whatsoever that anything the United States says or does is going to have much of an impact on the growing unhappiness among the people in the Middle East. It's pretty much just watch and wait. Maybe play some hoops.

On an optimistic note, perhaps the Chinese navy will keep the Suez Canal open by force, if it comes to that.

## **TWO SIDES OF THE SAME INADEQUATE COIN.**

It seems like forever ago, but last Tuesday, just before Egypt exploded and distracted Barack Obama from his job of transforming the country, he gave his nearly anticipated State of the Union address which, unlike most such speeches, left many people, both in the House chamber and watching along at home, awake. Mostly this was because they were unable to doze, what with the "monorail" song from the Simpsons running through their heads as they pondered the President's brilliant plans to fix the nation's fiscal problems by spending even more money than it doesn't have on even more dross that it doesn't need or want, most notably the perennial liberal pipe dream of high speed rail.

We had intended to divide our analysis of the State of the Union into two parts: the President's part and the Republican's rebuttal. Normally we don't mention the rebuttal, but we thought it was important this year because it was strong where Barack's was weak and weak where Barack's was strong. In any case, like Obama himself, we were caught off guard by the unrest in Egypt. But unlike Obama, we are possessed of cat-like quickness and with an enormous effort we were able to change our plans, combining our State of the Union analysis into one piece, leaving the opportunity to address Egypt as well. TaaaDaaaa.

The President's bit was about what we expected. He was graceful. He was authoritative. He was eloquent. And he was completely and utterly clueless.

Three months after what may be the most shocking midterm election in the history of the Republic, Barack either still doesn't understand what it is that the voters were trying to say or he is hoping that they have forgotten and moved on to something else. We're afraid that both he and they are going to be sadly disappointed.

The One, you see, has once again, decided that it doesn't matter what Americans tell pollsters or what Americans tell politicians at the ballot box. He knows what is best for them and he is going to take care of it. They want less spending, smaller deficits, and more responsibility? Pffffffffffff. He's going to give them fast trains like the ones the Chinese are getting. That's the key, you know. Fast trains. He's going to give the American public some budget cuts. But not now. Maybe later. Much later.

This sets up a clash, of course, between the voters and their President. As Andrew Malcolm noted in the *Los Angeles Times*, the President is playing with proverbial fire here:

A new Gallup Poll out this morning finds that 71% of Americans, even many who do not think highly of the "tea party," say it's important that Republicans should take its positions into account.

Gallup appears puzzled by its findings: While only 6% of Democrats call themselves "tea party" supporters and only 11% hold a favorable view of it, more than half of Democrats still . . . think it's important the GOP work the movement's views into Republican programs. Perhaps some hope the tea party will help weaken the GOP, despite increasing support for the tea party's fiscal conservatism as deficit fears mount.

Among Republicans, not surprisingly, 88% say including the tea party is at least somewhat important, while a majority (53%) say it's very important.

Additionally, while the American people are worried about jobs, the economy, and the *all but certain impending return of inflation*, the President can't help but prattle on endlessly about how green he wants his valley to be. Green this. Green that. Green the other. Obama promises green jobs and green energy. He swears that the new green wave will make everything wonderful and make all our fears melt away. But he is, as all Utopians are, either delusional or full of . . . beans.

In any case, Obama remains intent on bringing about the “progressive” transformation of the nation, even as nation would rather he stop it. He offers his transformation in nice, post-Tucson, dulcet tones. But he offers it nonetheless, demonstrating that he is still either clueless about the American people or contemptuous of them.

As for the Republicans, they have exactly the opposite problem. They hear the American people. They understand what needs to be done. And there is almost no chance whatsoever that they will be able to sell “what needs to be done” in a political setting, at least not a presidential setting.

The new House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan did a very nice job with his rebuttal. He described the problem facing the nation smartly, powerfully, and unflinchingly. More to the point, he promised to do something about it. And he did so believably.

Longtime readers know that we are almost as skeptical of Republicans in Washington as we are of Democrats in Washington. We think that they tend to prove Lord Acton's insight better than almost any creature on earth. Newt the backbencher was great. Newt the Speaker? Meh . . . not so much. If the Republicans can manage to keep up with Paul Ryan's message the other night, then we will be pleased, for they will have surpassed our expectations.

What they will not have done, however, is figured out a way to make recovery from disaster sound both necessary and hopeful. The Republicans' problem – as established in Ryan's rebuttal last Tuesday – is

that they are dour, negative, unhappy sorts, selling dour, negative, unhappy medicine for dour, negative, unhappy problems. It's tough to win over the public that way. And it's even tougher to win over the electorate. The blogger, journalist, and author Ira Stoll summed it up thusly:

Mr. Ryan is no Reagan. And the substance of his remarks reminded me of what I think I once heard George Will, back in the late 80s or early 90s, describe in political terms as the pre-Reagan Republican Party's dentist problem. The dentist tells you [that] you are eating too much candy and you have cavities and are going to have to undergo painful drilling. No one likes to hear this. The Republicans, telling Americans, as Mr. Ryan did, “our debt is out of control,” and if we're not careful we're going to end up like Greece or Ireland, risk turning their message into a pessimistic tale of American decline and the need for painful austerity measures.

Before the last recession, the worst recession since the Great Depression was the one which plagued the first year of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Yet despite that mess, despite double-digit unemployment, despite double-digit inflation, and despite the fact that Reagan knew that the medicine – Volcker-inspired tight money – would be hard to swallow, the President kept an almost impossible optimism about him. And it was this optimism that made the tough medicine easier to swallow and made certain that the public understood that there would be brighter days ahead.

Today's Republicans, unfortunately, are long on the depictions of the malady and the warnings about the medicine but are far, far too short on their promises regarding the cure. They share no hope. They have promised no recovery. Or as Stoll (and Will) put it, they are merely dentists with a drill. And that won't do.

The American people understand, in broad terms, what needs to be done. But they are not yet acculturated to the actual process of reining in spending, cutting government, and fighting back against waste and profligacy. If the Republicans are serious about moving beyond mere words and actually getting government under control, they will have to prepare the public for initial pain and convince them that it will be worth it in that it will restore the intrinsic greatness of the system. But in order to do so, they will have to be able to paint vivid and sanguine pictures of the future. And to date, they have shown no capacity for doing so.

What we are left with, then, are two conflicting but equally unsatisfactory political visions. On the one hand, we have the President who cares not one whit about the broad concerns of the people, but who has a way with words and understands the people's innate affection for their nation and its unique and charming economic system.

On the other hand, we have an opposition party that sees the problems clearly and is rather plainly in sync with the will of people, but which has no idea at all about how to make the necessary anguish seem palatable or worthwhile in the long run.

Both sides suffer from a failure of imagination. Obama, of course, is incapable of imagining that the people's opinion might matter as much as his own. And the Republicans can't quite seem to imagine the world on the other side of the "pain" that they insist is absolutely necessary.

Naturally, whichever side figures out how to overcome its shortcomings first will emerge victorious in 2012 – and beyond. If neither side figures it out – a possibility which we fear – then the nation will, we're afraid, simply muddle along as it is until a crisis compels action, optimism and will of the people be damned.

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