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## THEY SAID IT

The protesters and pro-Mubarak people have had a test of strength, but it has not thrown up a clear victor. Both sides are now obliged to see that to continue down that path is too costly and destructive, almost an embryo civil war. So there is nothing for it except for the small number of contenders for powers to start bartering in private about who is going to get what. This process is too personal and intimate for the outside world to be informed about it. It is a safe guess, though, that while the media are in Tahrir Square boosting “revolution,” and commenting that nothing will ever be the same again, the future is being settled over their heads by the half dozen power brokers who count. The media always manage to select protesters who say in good English that they are staying in the square until they are victorious and Mubarak has gone. These interviews are really promotions of the reporter’s own political prejudices. Remember the book by Ed Behr making a mockery of slanting the news in this sort of crisis with the title *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?...*

Ambassador Frank Wisner has seen Mubarak, who refused to give him a second meeting. Again, the reason for this is unknown: Either he did not like what he was being told or he wanted to hide up that the two of them shared the same view of what to do and he now wanted to conceal that fact by appearing to defy the United States. Wisner has put on record his opinion that it is “crucial” that Mubarak stay in power until the September elections, in order to supervise the change of regime. A man combining intelligence and experience, he speaks Egyptian Arabic and knows the country inside out. It is reasonable to conclude at least for the time being that Mubarak will indeed survive until September as the central figure on the stage, whereupon the curtains behind him will part and someone pretty much like him will emerge to take a bow.

David Pryce-Jones, “Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?” *National Review Online*, February 6, 2011.

## EGYPT, TAKE TWO.

Last week, we read a bit of a column by *National Review’s* Jay Nordlinger that we thought was interesting and which kept echoing back to us, day after day. Every time we’d hear the President – in his new and authoritative voice – say that time had finally caught up to Hosni Mubarak and that the Egyptian people had spoken; every time we’d hear the Secretary of State say that it was important to get past what once was and move on to what will be; every time we’d see the President’s spokesman say that the time to move on without Mubarak is

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“now” and “now started yesterday”; every time we’d watch the former Secretary of State, who served under the current Secretary of State’s husband, say that the Mubarak era was “over” – we thought of Nordlinger:

I’ve noticed something the last few days — something that gives us a human lesson, I think: Those who know the most about the Middle East are saying the least, when it comes to the turmoil in Egypt. Or they are speaking most cautiously. They’re quickest to say, “I really don’t know. I don’t know the exact nature of this, or how it will turn out.” They seem to be humblest, about what can be known, now.

I’m talking about Bernard Lewis, David Pryce-Jones, Amir Taheri, Fouad Ajami — people like that. These are men who have spent years and years in the Middle East, studying its politics, peoples, and languages, taking in everything possible. Those who know less speak in far more confident tones. They are even cocksure. I’m not sure we should trust anyone who speaks in those tones, just now.

Two weeks ago, Mubarak shouldn’t go anywhere, according to the Vice President. Three weeks ago, he was like “family,” according to the Secretary of State. A month ago he was a friend and trusted ally, according to the President himself. And for the past thirty years, he was the principal regional guardian against yet another major Arab-Muslim attack on the sole democracy in the region and the United States’ sole true ally as well.

But today, the people have spoken. It’s over. He’s gone and it’s time to get over it. That strikes us as . . . well . . . strange. And foolish. And probably wrong.

Now, please, don’t misinterpret what we’re trying to say here. We have no brief whatsoever to make for Hosni Mubarak, who is, in many ways the butcher and brutalizer that his opponents claim he is. And we have

never thought much of the “realist” school that insists that supporting dictators leads to stability. As the events of the last few weeks prove, the entire premise of this “realist” school is only true until it isn’t.

Whatever the case, we can’t help but feel a little uncomfortable with the certainty and the alacrity with which this administration has — all of a sudden — embraced the upheaval again Mubarak. For a number of reasons, we think that the President’s attempts to appear to lead global opinion on this matter and to embrace anew the “human rights” mantle are misguided. Moreover, we believe that they will damage the nation irreparably, irrespective of the eventual outcome in Egypt. As is his wont, Obama has self-absorbedly miscalculated, this time thinking that the revolution on the streets of Cairo and Alexandria is less about the price of wheat or the lack of jobs available to college educated Egyptians than it is about him.

To hear the folks over at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue tell the story these days, the angry protestors in the streets of Cairo are your average, everyday freedom-loving patriots, searching desperately for a way to exercise their rights to free speech, freedom of assembly, and access to Twitter. They are modern Founding-Fathers-in-waiting, the George Washingtons, Thomas Jeffersons, John Adams, and Ben Franklins of Egypt, steeling themselves against their own George III, a nasty bit of work who wants to tax their tea.

This is nonsense — and not just any old nonsense, mind you, but fatuous, dangerous, infuriating nonsense. There are no “freedom fighters” or Founding Fathers in this struggle, at least not as Americans understand the terms. What’s more, there is no King George. No one on either side of this struggle believes in “freedom” as Americans believe in freedom. No one on either side of this struggle believes in human rights as Americans believe in human rights. There is no natural law here, no inalienable rights, no Western conception of the social contract. Advocacy of “democratic” reform sounds just super-awesome when it comes from the American bully pulpit. But there is only one little problem:

There are no “democrats” in Egypt, at least not in the Western sense of the term. And anyone who believes otherwise – up to and including the President of the United States – is a fool begging for humiliation and trouble.

Last week, as the American president was giddily following the crowds chanting for democracy, the British newswire *Reuters* reminded us of a Pew poll taken in various locations throughout the Muslim world last spring. As you read the following, please keep in mind that Reuters, whatever else it may be, is generally hyper-sympathetic to the Muslim peoples of Middle East, as evinced by the fact that it has, since 9/11, refused to refer to Islamic terrorism without either a disclaimer or scare-quotes around the word “terrorism,” thereby denoting what it believes to be the subjectivity of the word.

Collected in April and May of last year for Pew’s Global Attitudes Project, the report described Muslim attitudes about religion in politics in seven countries – Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey.

A sample group of 1,000 was surveyed in face-to-face interviews. Here are the data for Egyptian responses:

— Is it good that Islam plays a large role in politics? 95 percent said “yes” and 2 percent “bad.”

— Is Islam’s influence in politics positive or negative? 85 percent said “positive,” 2 percent said “negative.”

— How much of a role does Islam play in Egyptian politics now? 48 percent said “large” and 49 percent said “small.”

— Is there a struggle between groups that want to modernise Egypt and Islamic fundamentalists? 31 percent said “yes.” Of them, 27 percent

described themselves as modernisers and 59 percent called themselves fundamentalists.

— Are suicide bombings justified? 46 percent said “never,” 34 percent “rarely,” 12 percent “sometimes” and 8 percent “often.” . . .

— Should adulterers be stoned? 82 percent said “yes.”

— Should apostates from Islam face the death penalty? 84 percent said “yes.”

— Should thieves be flogged or have their hands cut off? 77 percent said “yes.”

Get that? 59% of Egyptians consider themselves fundamentalists. 54% think that suicide bombings are at least sometimes justified. 84% think that converts from Islam should face the death penalty. And 82% think that adulterers should be stoned. And these are the people that the leader of the free world has decided – on a whim, apparently – should set the agenda for the most populous Arab nation on earth. Want more? Consider the following from David Goldman, an editor at the magazine *First Things* and the real name of the well-known columnist on international affairs known for years as Spengler:

Nine out of ten Egyptian women suffer genital mutilation. US President Barack Obama said Jan. 29, “The right to peaceful assembly and association, the right to free speech, and the ability to determine their own destiny . . . are human rights. And the United States will stand up for them everywhere.” Does Obama think that genital mutilation is a human rights violation? To expect Egypt to leap from the intimate violence of traditional society to the full rights of a modern democracy seems whimsical.

In fact, the vast majority of Egyptians has practiced civil disobedience against the Mubarak regime for years. The Mubarak government announced a “complete” ban on genital mutilation in 2007, the second time it has done so – without success, for the Egyptian population ignored the enlightened pronouncements of its government. Do Western liberals cheer at this quiet revolt against Mubarak’s authority?

Suzanne Mubarak, Egypt’s First Lady, continues to campaign against the practice, which she has denounced as “physical and psychological violence against children.” Last May 1, she appeared at Aswan City alongside the provincial governor and other local officials to declare the province free of it. And on October 28, Mrs Mubarak inaugurated an African conference on stopping genital mutilation.

The most authoritative Egyptian Muslim scholars continue to recommend genital mutilation.

Does any of this mean that the United States should not support, in any way, the yearnings of the Egyptian people to gain greater self-determination? Of course not. But as we noted last week, a dedication to the principles that Obama now seems to want to champion might have seemed more legitimate had he adopted them on January 21, 2009 rather than . . . oh, say, 20 minutes ago. As it is, the guy seems as if he can’t make up his mind, can’t decide what he really believes, and has no idea what he’s doing. And in the end, we suspect that this means that his insistence of being part of the story will do more harm than good.

You will note that in all of the Obama administration’s clamoring about what “must” happen in Egypt, the object of all the American edicts is Mubarak himself. Mubarak must do this. He must do that. He must do the other thing. He must leave by September. He

must leave before September. He must sing the lead in Phantom of the Opera when it goes on tour next fall. Whatever. Mubarak. Mubarak. Mubarak. Never is anyone or anything beyond the man mentioned.

All of this ignores or, at the very least, glosses over the fact that Mubarak is a very old and reportedly very sick man who wasn’t going to stand for re-election in September anyway. So the Obama administration is cutting its own throat in Egypt, sacrificing an ally, aligning itself with an unreliable and notably anti-American crowd, and to what end, exactly? Ensuring that Mubarak’s kid doesn’t get to run for president? Was that really going to happen anyway?

The fact of the matter is that all of the meddling that the Obama team has taken upon itself over the past several days has completely papered over the fact that the regime in Egypt is all but certainly going to remain completely intact, with the singular exception of Mubarak. The ruling party will still be the ruling party. The military will still ensure the stability of the ruling party. And the party and military elites will still occupy the positions of power and prestige. Sure, Omar Suleiman will be in charge instead of Hosni Mubarak, but beyond that? Meh.

The only real big change is that now – at the insistence of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton no less – the Muslim Brotherhood will now be considered accepted and acceptable members of the ruling class. Vice President Suleiman spent the weekend cajoling them to the negotiating table, and heaven only knows what he was willing to grant them in return for the decision to bestow upon this dialogue their seal of legitimacy.

What are we left with, then, is a “revolution” that will likely end without much revolution at all. As things stand, the Egyptian army controls the streets, and the protestors continue to carry on only with the army’s blessing. As the *Washington Post* noted over the weekend:

The army’s increasingly visible presence has clearly made the area around the square much safer. The stone-throwing

battles with protesters sympathetic to President Hosni Mubarak have stopped. Now, stones gathered as ammunition have been set out on the square to spell messages. One said: “We are the people of Facebook.”

But the military escalation also is a sign that the army is much more in control. It has set up checkpoints at every entrance to the square - in addition to those run by the demonstrators themselves - and its tanks are mostly arranged with their barrels facing the protest. On the side streets leading to the square, some intersections have been blocked off with coils of barbed wire. Heavy traffic barriers are in place, as well as sand-bagged emplacements.

Not coincidentally, Vice President Omar Suleiman is also General Omar Suleiman, the now-former head of Egypt’s military intelligence. And we doubt very much that he has any intention of seeing anything like a full-blown revolution or “regime change,” if you will, take place. The army remains universally esteemed by the Egyptian people, and the young protestors will have to do a great deal more than shout about “Mubarak the Butcher” if they are to cast any aspersion on the army – or on the regime that army seems likely to preserve.

Now, unlike the “cocksure” folks at the White House, in Foggy Bottom and at the Old Executive Office Building, we don’t pretend to know for sure how this revolution will end. But however it ends, we suspect that the two parties that will get the short end of the proverbial stick are the United States and Israel.

The protestors have expressed their distaste for the Mubarak-supporting Americans, and no amount of Johnny-come-lately happy talk is likely to have any effect on that at all. At the same time, the regime that the administration just betrayed is, as best we can tell, still poised to retain power, regardless of what happens to Mubarak. And the administration has done everything in its power over the last week to

ensure that those members of the regime who retain power will have more than sufficient reason to dislike and distrust their American counterparts.

And then, of course, there is the Muslim Brotherhood, which may prove to be the only faction in the Egyptian political process that the Obama administration manages to help and to further empower. And we doubt seriously if they will do much to show their appreciation. Indeed, we suspect that the Clinton-bolstered Muslim Brothers will, simply by their presence as a player in the new Egyptian political reality, make the Middle East a much more dangerous and volatile place.

Now to be sure, there are those in the mainstream press and even in the administration who say that the Glenn Becks and Andrew McCarthys of the world are making too big a deal about the Brothers. These Islamists, they claim, are different from the other Islamists throughout the world. They’re more modern, they say; less war-like; not anxious to destroy the world or start a war. They just want to institute a little Sharia law here and there, and what’s the harm in that?

Well, we can’t speak personally about the glories of Sharia living, but we suppose we could let the clitorectomied Egyptian girls answer the question – if they were allowed to do so, that is. Or we could let 14-year-old Hena from Bangladesh answer that, if she were still alive. You see, Hena lived under Sharia law in Shariatpur, Bangladesh. After she was raped by a 40-year-old relative, *she* was sentenced to 100 lashes. She died after 80 lashes. We could let the countless women stoned to death for adultery or for bearing children out of wedlock or . . . well, you get the point.

But, you see, that’s not even the real or the most significant issue with the Muslim Brothers. The real issue is that the Muslim Brotherhood is, essentially, the parent organization of Hamas, the terrorist organization that has been trying nonstop to destroy Israel and which “governs” (and we use that term loosely) the Gaza Strip. Hamas lobbs missiles, rockets, rocks, and suicide bombers at Israeli from Gaza

(figuratively in this last case). And so, in the interest of its self-preservation, Israel has blockaded Gaza, in an attempt to prevent the importation of weapons to be used in this ongoing terrorist war of attrition.

But Israel is not alone in enforcing the blockade. Egypt, which also shares a border with Gaza, has cooperated with Israel in the air, land, and sea blockade since June, 2007, when Hamas finally drove the (comparatively more) moderate Fatah faction out of the strip. Egypt has even, in recent months, begun constructing an underground steel barrier to stop the building of the tunnels that are used to circumvent the blockade and to smuggle weapons into Gaza. In essence, the Israeli blockade could not function without Egyptian support, or without Israeli incursion into Egyptian territory.

The Muslim Brotherhood apologists insist that there is no way that the Brothers could harm Israel. There is too much cooperation between the Egyptian military and the American military; the Egyptian officers would never stand for a return to pre-American alliance days. And even if they did, most of their weaponry is American, which is to say that it couldn't function in the long term without American support. This ensures, essentially, that the Egyptians will not take up arms against the Israelis, no matter what the Muslim Brothers say and no matter what their role in the new, post-Mubarak government.

This misses the point entirely. In order to harm Israel, Egypt doesn't have to *do* anything. Indeed, it has, merely, to do nothing – nothing about Hamas, nothing about the blockade, nothing about the import of weapons and funding to Gaza from Iran. Even if the current Egyptian regime remains essentially intact, as we expect, the damage to Israel could be incalculable. Anyone who insists that the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the next Egyptian government will be completely benign misses or ignores the salient fact that such participation will almost certainly facilitate the end of the Egyptian blockade of Gaza, the concomitant *de facto* recognition of the Brotherhood-affiliated Hamas as legitimate rulers of Gaza, and ultimately a significant increase in the threat to Israel.

All things considered then, whatever happens in Egypt, don't expect the result to match Barack Obama's exultant rhetoric – whatever side he happens to be on that day. There is too much going on, too many variables that appear to have gone unexamined by the administration, and too much foolishness and naiveté on the part of the President to ensure that the Egyptian unrest turns out well. We hate to strike a premature pessimistic note, but while we are heartened by the images of men and women rebelling against tyranny, we would feel better about the outcome of that rebellion if those men and women didn't hold some fairly unpleasant ideas of their own and if the most powerful man on earth didn't believe it was his responsibility to ensure that at least part of the story was about him.

One more thought before closing, as bad as things might get in Egypt, we suspect that the real damage done by this episode in American diplomacy will all but certainly be felt most acutely elsewhere.

It has been almost a year since we started writing about “hedging” in foreign affairs, and we have written about it several times since, usually conveying the same basic message as we did in that first piece, published February 22, 2010:

“Hedging,” you see, is the theme of global relations under the Obama regime. The Indians don't know if they can trust Obama, and they're making contingency plans. The Japanese don't know if they can trust Obama, and they're making contingency plans. The Australians don't know if they can trust Obama, and they're making contingency plans. *Etc., etc., ad infinitum.*

With regard to Iran and its nukes, what this means is that the United States' erstwhile allies in and near the Middle East have no choice but to make their own contingency plans. They, like everyone else, are simply unable to trust that Obama will live up to the commitments his country has made.

Our concern about the need for hedging in foreign affairs was further bolstered this week when we read yet another story on the erstwhile secret diplomatic cables provided by WikiLeaks. Here we quote from *The Telegraph* of London:

Information about every Trident missile the US supplies to Britain will be given to Russia as part of an arms control deal signed by President Barack Obama next week.

Defence analysts claim the agreement risks undermining Britain's policy of refusing to confirm the exact size of its nuclear arsenal.

The fact that the Americans used British nuclear secrets as a bargaining chip also sheds new light on the so-called "special relationship", which is shown often to be a one-sided affair by US diplomatic communications obtained by the WikiLeaks website . . .

Washington lobbied London in 2009 for permission to supply Moscow with detailed data about the performance of UK missiles. The UK refused, but the US agreed to hand over the serial numbers of Trident missiles it transfers to Britain.

Under normal circumstances and in a normal presidency, we'd ask "are you serious?" But these are, of course, not normal circumstances and this is hardly a normal presidency. Is this really how one treats a friend and ally?

Sadly, it appears that in the age of Obama, the answer is yes. Which brings us back to Egypt.

In light of what Obama was willing to do Mubarak and the speed and relish with which he did so – and given the new revelations of Obama's fresh betrayal of the "special relationship" with Britain – can there be any doubt that the leaders of the rest of this nation's presumptive allies will be looking elsewhere for support, at least for the foreseeable future? Can anyone doubt that anyone who once relied on American support will be hedging, looking for others on whom they can count in times of need?

Again, we feel no pity whatsoever for Mubarak. By any definition of the word, he was a dictator, and a brutal one at that. Moreover, he knew the drill. He was America's "friend" as long as he proved to be an asset to America's broader self interest.

But do you suppose that he ever thought, even for a second, that the concept of American self interest would or could be whittled down to a presidential whim, to the self-absorption of a diplomatic neophyte who wants the world to see him as a multicultural savior and ambassador of good will to the Muslim people? Do you think he ever thought that he'd see his friendship and alliance tossed aside simply because one man decided – at an exceptionally late hour, nonetheless – that he should at least look like a "man of the people"?

More to the point, we suppose, do you suppose that anyone else anywhere else is going to make the same mistake?

We don't think so either.

More of that "smart diplomacy," we guess.

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