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THEY SAID IT

Among the lessons taught by the French Revolution there is none sadder or more striking than this, that you may make everything else out of the passions of men except a political system that will work, and that there is nothing so pitilessly and unconsciously cruel as sincerity formulated into dogma.

James Russell Lowell, "Political Essays," 1888.

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REVOLUTIONS AND DEMOCRACY.

So . . . as it turns out, the great Egyptian Revolution of 2011 is, at least to this point, not much of a revolution, unless by "revolution" you mean "*coup d'etat*." Turns out it was the country's army – not the much-ballyhooed "people power" – that sent Pharaoh Mubarak packing last Friday. And it is the army that today controls the nation, its governing institutions, and all its tanks and guns, while promising elections – in the future – after a sufficient "transition" period. In sum, then: the president of Egypt has been ousted, the parliament of Egypt has been dissolved, the constitution of Egypt has been indefinitely suspended, and, as Barack Obama put it, "The people of Egypt have spoken [and] their voices have been heard."

Hooray?

Well maybe. But we're not entirely convinced that Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi – both of whom Obama cited in support of the new and "democratic" Egypt – would consider a military coup a "victory." But then, who knows? Maybe they'd have loved the idea of the guys with the tanks "consolidating power," to borrow a phrase from the *New York Times*, and instituting "sweeping" military rule. Stranger things have happened, we suppose.

Whatever the case, now that Mubarak is gone and the Egyptian people have, in theory at least, "won," several questions remain, the most important of which deal with the dedication to the causes of liberty and democracy of some of the more important players in this unfolding drama.

Do the protestors in Cairo really care about democracy and freedom? Or are they more concerned, now that Mubarak is gone, about the practical issues that sparked the unrest in the first place – the global price of wheat, jobs (or the lack thereof), and the general economic malaise of the non-oil-producing Arab world? Is the army really dedicated to “free elections” and democracy? Or is that a smart, well-worded effort at dispersing the protestors and resuming normal Egyptian life, even as the ruling regime entrenches, “consolidates” power and moves on, much as before, but with the Mubarak family shoved aside? And lastly, does Barack Obama matter? He’s been running his mouth quite a bit over the last several weeks, but did his yammering have any influence? Will it go forward? And if there is any chance that it might, does *he* care enough about Arab democracy to do what is necessary to help ensure the peaceful and successful Egyptian transition to representative government?

If one looks at the list of revolutions in modern history – from, say, the 18th century on – two things are clear. First, successful rebellion – defined as regime-changing – is rather rare. And successful democratic rebellion – which is to say replacement of an old regime with a new and lasting democratic regime – is rarer still, practically non-existent.

There are reasons for both circumstances, of course. As regards the first, in the political affairs of man, something akin to Newton’s first law of motion tends to apply, i.e. a body at rest tends to stay at rest unless acted upon by an external force (such as, say, a sharp spike in the price of wheat). And even when external forces push the body at rest into motion, Newton’s Third Law tends to apply, which is to say that a second body (in this case, the regime) pushes back.

It’s all a little more complicated than this, we’ll concede. But delving into this complication is beyond the purview of this essay.

What concerns us more today – particularly given that the “revolution” in Egypt has already deposed the tyrant – is that revolutions tend, on the whole, to be, well, revolutionary, which is to say that they tend

to wreak havoc on the institutions that existed prior to the revolution. Say, for example, in the case of Egypt, the office of the President, the Parliament, and the Constitution. And that, more than anything else, tends to present problems for the construction of democracy.

The French Revolution is the quintessential case study in the wanton destruction of existing institutions and the effect of that destruction on the prospects for successful transition to consensual government built on the notions of freedom and equality under the law. The French revolutionaries demanded *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. And in pursuit of those seemingly unobjectionable ends, they considered nothing sacred, particularly that which was erstwhile considered sacred. The old order had to be destroyed. And it had to be destroyed completely. The historian François Mignet describes this destruction and the pursuit of more righteous ends in the aftermath of the fall of the Bastille as follows:

The movement of Paris communicated itself to the provinces; the country population, imitating that of the capital, organized itself in all directions into municipalities for purposes of self-government; and into bodies of national guards for self-defence. Authority and force became wholly displaced; royalty had lost them by its defeat, the nation had acquired them . . . the chateaux were fired and the peasantry burned the title-deeds of their lords . . . Classes had disappeared, arbitrary power was destroyed; with these, their old accessory, inequality, too, must be suppressed. Thus must proceed the establishment of the new order of things, and these preliminaries were the work of a single night . . . It was the transition from an order of things in which everything belonged to individuals, to another in which everything was to belong to the nation.

The French revolutionaries, in their defense, tried to build a fair and just society and a morally sound government and social order. But they failed. Miserably, in fact. And the reason they failed is because there was no foundation left, after the revolution, on which to build a democratic government or a democratic social order. France itself had no history of democratic government, and those institutions that might have provided a foundation for the development of such a government were attacked by the revolutionaries as part of the problem, rather than viewed part of the potential solution.

And the results, of course, were grizzly. Thousands were slain in a mad orgy of bloodlust. Estimates of the number of people killed during this campaign, range from 18,500 to 40,000. During the final month, 1,900 public executions took place. Men, women, children, young, old, rich, and poor. Some chroniclers might add “guilty and innocent” to this list. But they would be wrong to do so, because none of the victims were guilty of anything, for there were no bona fide laws, secular or moral, to violate. Rule was entirely arbitrary, as was death.

Now, contrast the French Revolution with the American Revolution, which took place a decade earlier. In the case of the Americans, not only did they have a long and successful history of self-governance, but they actually preserved the institutions responsible for that history, merely divorcing themselves from those institutions that no longer adhered to the principles of self-government and the rights of Englishmen as citizens of the British Empire.

It is no coincidence, then, that the American Revolution produced lasting democratic rule, while the French Revolution produced merely torrents of blood. And it is also no coincidence that similar “revolutions” since have produced similar results.

The list of rebellions and revolutions from 1789 to today is long. But, as we said, the list of successful insurgencies is far shorter. Among the most prominent of these successes were: The Indian independence movement, the Russian Revolution, the Taiping Rebellion, the Chinese Revolution, the August

Revolution in Vietnam, the Cuban Revolution, and the Iranian Revolution. All but the first one of these shares a common characteristic, namely that they, like the French Revolution, produced rivers of blood and little else.

The one exception, the Indian independence movement, produced the world’s largest democracy. It produced its own share of internal bloodletting, of course, but even the American experiment has not been free of domestic bloodshed, as the countless Civil War dead attest. What distinguished the Indian “revolution” from the others is that it was founded upon the retention of democratic institutions, rather than on their ashes. And as with the American Revolution, those institutions were British in origin and were retained for the purpose of retaining British liberty and self-governance.

The lesson here is that democracy does not simply happen by accident. It does not grow from nothing. It has to be nurtured and founded upon institutions that support its growth and its perpetuation. Countries with no history of democratic rule and no institutions capable of promoting democratic rule are simply not going to be democratic in the long run. They may have elections from time to time. But the Soviets had elections. The Mad Mullahs in Iran have elections. Hamas came to power in Gaza via election. And even old, nasty, stinking, dirty, mean, rotten Hosni Mubarak had elections. But in order for those elections to mean anything at all, there must be something more.

Most of the world’s successful, long-term democracies came into being by means other than revolution. Some – such as most of the nations of Western Europe – developed democracy gradually, over a period of centuries, building on the institutions extant in their society, i.e., the remnants of Greek and Roman culture, the influence of Christianity, and the synthesis of the two. Some had democratic institutions imposed upon them by their purportedly dastardly imperial masters. The United States, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, New Zealand, South Africa, Bahamas, Bermuda, etc., etc., were all British colonies and all had British rights and institutions

“imposed” upon them. Still others have developed democracy of late, but again under the watchful eye of foreign “interlopers” who have imposed democratic institutions on their charge nations and have stuck around to ensure that those institutions took root. Japan, South Korea, and Germany spring most readily to mind.

Whatever the case, the successful democracies of the globe are those nations that have had the opportunity to build and fortify the institutions necessary to preserve and enhance self-governance. Whether over centuries of social evolution or over decades of imposed and guided transition, institutions have been created and entrenched, thereby ensuring the longevity (though not necessarily the permanence) of democratic rule.

When American critics of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan insist that “the boys” must be brought home now and that the wars must be halted immediately, they tend to ignore the fact that one of the critical goals of both wars was the facilitation of democratic governance in erstwhile autocratic states. And such facilitation requires not only the defeat of the autocrat, but the development and cementing of democratic institutions, which takes time.

It is one thing to argue, as many have, that the facilitation of democracy in such places is pointless or, at the very least, beyond the capabilities and responsibilities of American power. But it something else altogether – something completely absurd and historically ignorant – to support the goal of facilitating democracy, yet to insist nonetheless on the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of American support. It is worth noting, we think, that the American facilitation of democracy continues to this day in Germany, Japan, and South Korea. And if Iraq and Afghanistan are to be successful in their embrace of representative government, we’d expect that a similar long-term commitment would likewise be necessary.

And this brings us back to Egypt.

As we noted above, the Egyptian Revolution is, so far at least, not much of a revolution, which is to say that the prospect for the fomentation of democracy is, at least, not unreasonable at this point. The most critical institution in the nation, the military, remains intact. And other important ones – the presidency, the parliament, and the constitution – can be restored, if the Army chooses to do so, which is to say that they can serve as foundations for the construction of a more liberal civil society.

The problem, of course, is that these institutions are, in and of themselves, insufficient to ensure the creation of democracy, in that they have never been truly democratic in nature. And furthermore, the people of Egypt have no history of democratic governance to speak of and no true conception of the work that will be necessary to aid in the formation of truly democratic institutions. Democracy, as we said, does not simply happen by accident.

All of this is to say therefore that the Egyptian Revolution is, at this point, manageable but yet exceptionally precarious as a precursor of democracy. In order for it to produce the much discussed and much hoped for democratic result, the institutions extant in the country will have to maintain a steadfast dedication to that goal. But more than that, they will have to get considerable outside help from those who are capable of providing the resources and competence necessary to aid them in this effort.

The protestors who toppled Mubarak must therefore not only understand their vital role in the formation of democratic foundations, but must also control their passions and not emulate the French *canaille*, losing control and attacking those institutions that already exist and that will prove critical.

The Egyptian military, for its part, must remain in control of its passions as well and maintain its apparent dedication to a political transition without violence. If the military turns on the protestors, or if the military command determines that the protestors’ goals do not meet their own, then that particular

institution will turn on the *demos*, rendering the expectation of a democratic outcome a delusion at best.

Finally, the outside influences in this case must support the formation of democratic institutions and must do so on an extended and ongoing basis. President Obama, for example, has pledged his dedication to Egyptian democracy and has promised an “aid package” to opposition groups. This will help. But it will almost certainly be woefully insufficient, given the enormity of the challenge.

It is also worth remembering that the Americans are not the only players here and not the only ones with serious stakes in the game. And if financial aid is all that the American president is willing to offer, then he will undoubtedly be beaten.

Among others, the Saudis, the Israelis, and the Iranians all have vital interests in the ultimate disposition of the Egyptian government. And two of these have the benefit of prodigious oil resources that will make the tapping of funds for Egyptian “aid” rather an effortless and uncomplicated process. The Chinese as well have an interest in the future of Egypt – though we’re unsure what that interest is – and the resources necessary to affect the present to fashion that future.

In the final analysis, if the Egyptian people are ever to experience a real democracy, the military will have to exercise strict control for a very long period of time. Why is this? Well, for starters the economic problems that led to the recent unrest won’t be solved any time soon, if ever. Second, the militant Islamists are likely to be extremely active in attempting to reignite public unrest in Egypt in the months to come.

The United States can live with a military dictatorship in Egypt. And it could live with a democracy, so long as it is managed by the military in such a way as to ensure that radical Islamists aren’t allowed to practice their version of democracy, i.e. “one man, one vote, one time.” Any other outcome would be dicey at best, which means that Barack will have to stop his yammering about the glories of democratic revolution

and support whatever steps the military leaders have to take in order to retain control, up to and including refraining from pressuring them to surrender control too soon.

As we’ve said before, we have no idea how any of this will turn out. And we continue to hope for the best. But given the history of democracy-producing revolutions, we’re skeptical. And given this American president’s personal history of irresolution in the face of discord, we are, moreover, quite worried.

If your future or that of your country depended on Barack Obama and his ability to maintain interest and consistency in anything other than his own personal well being, would you feel comfortable? Should we ask that question of Hosni Mubarak?

More to the point, we suppose, now that Obama has embraced “the democracy agenda” and sees himself as a global freedom fighter, will he have the sense and the patience to do what is right for the people of Egypt, even if that means keeping the military in charge for an extended period? Such actions would require Obama to supplant his desires and his dreams of glory with the real and critical, life-and-death desires of the Egyptian people. Is he capable?

Again, color us skeptical.

JIM WEBB QUILTS. DEMOCRATIC PARTY TO FOLLOW SUIT.

Regular readers may recall that last month, in our domestic politics forecast issue, we touched on the subject of Virginia Senator Jim Webb, about whom we predicted the following:

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.

Well . . . that didn't take long. Last week, Webb announced that he would not seek a second term as Senator, preferring instead to pursue other interests. As for what those interests might be, we suspect that they will include much more writing (Webb is an accomplished author of fiction and non-fiction) and much less politics. It is still possible, we suppose, that Webb will decide to challenge President Obama in from the right in the 2012 primary. And, obviously, we wouldn't be entirely surprised if he did. But we don't really expect it. Right now, Webb strikes us as worn out; tired; exhausted by Washington. In short, he strikes us a great many Americans do.

Most of the commentary on Webb's decision not to run for re-election has centered on a handful of storylines, all of which are interesting in and of themselves, but all of which, we think, miss the bigger picture.

Some note that by retiring Webb avoids a costly and likely bitter rematch with the former Senator and onetime presidential aspirant George Allen, who has already announced his candidacy and who was all set for the proverbial grudge match. As elections analyst Larry Sabato has noted, this was supposed to be one the fun races in 2012 – because of the grudge match angle – but now it's just another Senate race, dull and likely marginally competitive.

Others have noted that Webb's retirement means bad things for the Democrats as they struggle to try to hold on to the Senate. 2006, obviously, was a huge year for the Democrats, which is to say that 2012 will require them to defend rather a large number of seats in the Senate. The Democratic class is way overrepresented in 2012 (23 Dems to 10 Republicans), and, given this, it will be a massive challenge for them to hold the Senate. And this challenge just got significantly bigger, with the subtraction of one Democrat who had a real serious chance to keep a seat in an erstwhile Republican state. With Webb out,

retention of the Senate just got that much harder for Harry Reid and his fellow Democrats.

Finally, some who have paid close attention to Webb, to his self-styled mission in Washington, and to the nature of the Senate, have noted that the Senator's retirement is just one more sign that the American political system is in very dire straits in that it sets up its elected representative – the *people's* representatives – for political impotence. One expects a “democracy” to facilitate the expression of the will of the people. Instead, it facilitates the will of “the powerful,” which is something that the few idealists left in the world find incredibly depressing. As the columnist Peter Boyer put it last week:

Webb's closest friends believe that it wasn't the fight Webb dreaded, it was the prospect of another victory—and having to spend another term in the Senate.

He loathed the elemental chore of incumbency—the endless fundraising loop—and was temperamentally ill-suited to the pace and grind of Senate work. In his announcement yesterday, he proudly noted his shepherding of a new G.I. bill, which was a significant achievement for a junior senator, but in most regards he seemed a creature apart in that elite club. While his colleagues had a homing instinct for the nearest red light of a television camera, Webb was the one looking for the side door, to slip the press. His closest pals weren't Beltway pundits, or his political peers, but the remaining band of Vietnam buddies that still rally to his side when summoned (as he has always rallied to theirs).

All of this strikes us as probably correct. Webb probably did hate the Senate. What normal – or even semi-normal – person wouldn't? And his retirement certainly does mean that the Democrats are in trouble in 2012 and that George Allen will probably once again be able to call himself “Senator.”

But in the grander scheme of things, we think this is an enormous loss for the Democratic Party on two levels, both of which far exceed mere worries about holding a seat or retaining a majority.

For starters, Webb was supposed to represent a new kind of Democrat – or a new, old kind of Democrat – or the revival of a Democratic stalwart of sorts. Webb is a soldier, a Marine, a decorated hero. And he was a Democrat (albeit a short-timer). He was supposed to represent the end of the Democratic Party’s flirtation with McGovernism, the pacifist, anti-military stance it adopted during Vietnam and maintained thereafter. In 2006, he was the most prominent of a large handful of Democrats who had served in the military during or after Vietnam and who proudly displayed their affection for the services, but detested George Bush’s misuse of those services. He was supposed to represent a new era of Democratic muscularity and the end of the “weak on defense” meme. But as Boyer notes, “Webb’s moment was short-lived . . . Webb’s sort of Democrat fell from favor within the party during the course of one senatorial cycle, and became a vanishing breed by last November.”

What this suggests to us is two things. First, the Democratic experiment with muscular foreign policy and dedication to the military was entirely opportunistic. Second, and perhaps more important, the “blame Bush” strategy appears to have run its course. In 2006, someone like Webb could, conceivably, detest Bush and support Democrats, believing that they truly did care about the military and were truly dedicated the ending the purported “misuse” of the military in Iraq and Afghanistan. That’s no longer possible. For all his pre-presidency yammering about wanting the troops home and wanting the wars over and wanting a more humble foreign policy, Barack Obama now owns Iraq and Afghanistan every bit as much as George Bush did. Maybe this isn’t fair. But so what? He has, for all intents and purposes, kept most of Bush’s policies intact for two years and has made only a handful of significant changes. And one of those changes was to emulate Bush and to escalate one of the wars with a considerable surge of troops.

Whatever the case, Bush has been a Texan in good standing for more than two years now. And the idea of running against him no longer makes much sense, even to a guy like Webb, who made that the very centerpiece of his last campaign.

The most important thing that Webb’s demise suggests, however, is the ongoing disintegration of the Democratic Party and specifically the Democratic coalition. As we put it last month:

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.

This, obviously, is bad news for the Democrats. They can and will survive, but they will do so principally as the representatives of a credentialed white elite and a handful of minority or otherwise marginalized groups.

The Democrats’ essential relationship with the plurality of Americans – and white, working class Americans in particular – will be over. This is not to say that they won’t be able again to cobble together electoral victories, but they will never again be the nation’s “majority party.” Any victories they enjoy will have to be predicated on significant appeal to independent and unaffiliated voters. This will, by necessity, limit the Democrats’ ability to set the nation’s agenda or to undertake any major policy overhauls.

All of which is to say that the health care “reform” passed last spring may well prove to be American liberalism’s deathbed act. Webb warned Obama of “catastrophe” if the bill was pushed. And catastrophe is the almost certain result, if not for the country, then at least for the Democrats.

Too much to extrapolate from the retirement of 1% of the Senators in the country, you say? Perhaps.

But Webb is no ordinary Senator. He represented the aspirations of the Democratic Permanent Majority. And those dreams are now done.

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