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## THEY SAID IT

The Presidency is not merely an administrative office. That's the least of it...It is preeminently a place of moral leadership. All our great presidents were leaders at times when certain historic ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified. This is what the office is, a superb opportunity for reapplying and applying in new conditions the simple rules of human conduct to which we always go back.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The New York Times Magazine*, September 11, 1932.

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## POST-AMERICAN CHAOS.

As we go to press, the situation in Libya is still unresolved. The longest-serving colonel in the history of the world is still holding on to power, but it is beginning to look as if he will not only be deposed by his fellow Libyans, but that the number of those countrymen he manages to slaughter in the process will number in the low thousands, rather than tens or hundreds of thousands. Which, given his capacity for evil, strikes us as a comparatively good outcome.

Nevertheless, a number of critics at home and throughout the “global community” have been critical of the manner in which Barack Obama handled himself throughout this crisis – which is to say that people are shocked that he managed to ignore it almost entirely. For our part, we can't understand why people are shocked by this. He is who he is. And who he is is a guy who hates that the world keeps getting in the way of his presidency. He wants to “Win the Future,” by building monorails, or something like that, and not have to bother with petty tyrants and murderous thugs. Where's the fun in that? Besides, that's Hillary's job, isn't it? Can't she handle it?

Whatever the case, surprised or not, a great many people are upset that Obama hasn't done more or said more or even appeared to care more about the men and women being slaughtered in the streets of Tripoli by Gadhafi's hired mercenaries. Alex Spillius of the *London Telegraph* declares that: “Once again, the White House has fluffed its lines on the Arab revolution. With Gaddafi's helicopter gunships strafing his own people, with corpses piling up on the streets of Tripoli, President Barack Obama has remained silent.”

And that's some of the milder criticism. As always, the poisoned pen of the great Christopher Hitchens cuts harder, deeper, and more devastatingly than almost any other:

The Obama administration also behaves as if the weight of the United States in world affairs is approximately the same as that of Switzerland. We await developments. We urge caution, even restraint. We hope for the formation of an international consensus. And, just as there is something despicable about the way in which Swiss bankers change horses, so there is something contemptible about the way in which Washington has been affecting—and perhaps helping to bring about—American impotence. Except that, whereas at least the Swiss have the excuse of cynicism, American policy manages to be both cynical and naive.

This has been especially evident in the case of Libya. For weeks, the administration dithered over Egypt and calibrated its actions to the lowest and slowest common denominators, on the grounds that it was difficult to deal with a rancid old friend and ally who had outlived his usefulness. But then it became the turn of Muammar Qaddafi—an all-round stinking nuisance and moreover a long-term enemy—and the dithering began all over again. Until Wednesday Feb. 23, when the president made a few anodyne remarks that condemned “violence” in general but failed to cite Qaddafi in particular—every important statesman and stateswoman in the world had been heard from, with the exception of Obama. And his silence was hardly worth breaking. Echoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who had managed a few words of her own, he

stressed only that the need was for a unanimous international opinion, as if in the absence of complete unity nothing could be done, or even attempted. This would hand an automatic veto to any of Qaddafi's remaining allies. It also underscored the impression that the opinion of the United States was no more worth hearing than that of, say, Switzerland. Secretary Clinton was then dispatched to no other destination than Geneva, where she will meet with the U.N. Human Rights Council—an absurd body that is already hopelessly tainted with Qaddafi's membership.

It's hard to disagree with any of this. Obama has, indeed, dithered, to put it mildly, while Libyans have died. Except where police officers in Cambridge, Mass. are concerned or striking teachers in Wisconsin, the guy is clearly unable or unwilling to make any sort of determination about right and wrong. And he's even less capable of doing anything about it.

As we've said countless times before – borrowing a line from University of Tennessee law professor and “blogfather,” Instapundit's Glenn Reynolds – those who saw Obama as the second coming of Jimmy Carter were, it turns out, wildly and overly optimistic. Carter reborn is a “best-case” scenario at this point.

The question we're left with, though, is whether it is fair to hold Obama personally accountable for any of this. Yes, he's the guy in charge and therefore the man to blame when things go horribly wrong (or to praise if, by mistake, they happen to go right). But he is only doing what was asked of him. He is the president the world wanted. And he's the president the world got.

Way back when, in 2007 and 2008, that crazy Texas cowboy, George W. Bush, was the President of the United States. And everybody hated it. The “global community,” the United Nations (and its various arms), the leaders of the world, and even America's allies in Europe and elsewhere wanted an American foreign policy that was “humbler,” less intrusive, less aggressive, less “annoying.”

At the same time, every Democrat in the country – with perhaps the single notable exception of Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman – wanted an American foreign policy that was humbler, less intrusive, less aggressive, less “annoying.” They had plans to bring the troops home already. They called the surge in Iraq a “failure.” They were determined to “hit the reset button” and distance the future of the United States from its past.

Meanwhile, maybe half of the Republican Party – in this case, the libertarians and the paleo-conservatives – wanted an American foreign policy that was humbler, less intrusive, less aggressive, less “annoying.” They too wanted the “boys” (and girls) brought home. They too wanted to quit “wasting” money on foreign adventurism. They too, in short, had had it.

Finally, the American electorate – or at least the largest percentage of it to vote for one presidential candidate in twenty years – wanted an American foreign policy that was humbler, less intrusive, *etc., etc., ad nauseam*.

Everyone, it seemed wanted America to butt out and mind its own business. The old ideologically descriptive term “neoconservative” had become an utter pejorative – and not just for the anti-Semites any more, but for everyone. Neocons were warmongers, and if not warmongers, then, at the very least, hopelessly naïve and foolishly belligerent. “Bush’s wars” had worn everyone out. And America said “enough!”

Well . . . this is what “enough” looks like.

The aforementioned Glenn Reynolds writes:

I think what we’re seeing is a sort of John Birmingham-lite scenario. In Birmingham’s page-turner books *Without Warning* and *After America*, the mysterious disappearance of most of the United States causes all sorts of economic and security chaos to unfold, once America is no longer there to keep the lid on things.

He’s right, of course, only in this case, there’s no mystery. America’s figurative disappearance is not only obvious and comprehensible, it is exactly what the world claimed it wanted. Chaos, you say? You bet. “Chaos” is all but certainly the only word that describes events in the Middle East and North Africa over the last several weeks. And the chaos is only going to get worse.

As things stand today, the United States is, quite simply, unable even to try to affect global events to achieve tolerable outcomes. And this holds true, we should note, even if NATO decides, belatedly, to start defending the people of Libya against their tyrant. The United States is helpless to act definitively or unilaterally. In Egypt, in Bahrain, in Algeria, wherever. It has almost gone without notice that last week four Americans – Scott and Jean Adams, Phyllis Macay, and Robert A. Riggle – were murdered by Somali pirates. The four were taken in open waters ten days ago. And last week, after negotiations between the United States and the pirates broke down, the Somali thugs decided they too had had “enough” and didn’t figure the United States could do anything about it anyway. So they killed four Americans.

And what are the Americans going to do about it? President Obama issued a statement saying he was “outraged.” But what does that even mean? Does it mean he’s going to do something about the broader issue of piracy in the Indian Ocean? Does it mean he’ll bring these particular murderous brigands to justice? Who knows for sure? But our guess is that it means that he’ll do nothing – just as he was elected to do.

As we noted above, reports from Libya say that Gadhafi has been reduced to using mercenaries to kill his own people. But where did he get those mercenaries? Who are they? And why are they so willing to kill? We can’t say for sure, of course, but we suspect that the following, written by the man known as Reza Kahlili, might give some hints. Please note that PajamasMedia, which published Kahlili’s words, notes that “Reza Kahlili is a pseudonym for an ex-CIA spy who requires anonymity for safety reasons.”

In an interview today on the Al Arabya news network, an informed source within the Revolutionary Guards Corps revealed that Iran has several military bases in Libya.

The source, who requested anonymity due to his sensitive position within the Guards, elaborated further that the Iranian military bases are located mostly along Libya's borders with the African countries of Chad and Niger. From there, he said, the Guards actively smuggle arms and supply logistical assistance to rebellious groups in the African countries.

According to this source, Guards enter Libya under the guise of oil company employees. Most of these companies are under the control of the Revolutionary Guards.

The source, who is a colonel in the Guards, added that Gaddafi and his government are quite aware of these activities and have even signed joint contracts with those Iranian oil companies so that the Guards can enter Libya without any trouble.

What is the United States going to do about any of this? By itself? Nothing. Maybe, with the sanction and *prompting of* the embarrassed global community, the United States will lob a few bombs at Gadhafi. But what then? What about the Iranians and their secret bases? What about the murderous mercenaries? What will the United States do about all these accessories to Gadhafi's murders? Not a damn thing.

Just like the world demanded.

But what, you might reasonably ask is the alternative? What would we have Obama or any other president in his position do?

Naturally, this is a difficult question – made all the more difficult by the fact that the helplessness of the American position in the current circumstances is hardly the result of discreet or unique decisions. As with Carter in the late 1970s, the events as they are unfolding today are premised partly at least on the notion that the United States will embrace its helplessness and seek not to involve itself in grander global action. And this notion is itself the result of cumulative observations over time. The Soviets didn't worry, for example, about the American reaction to their invasion of Afghanistan because they had watched Carter and they understood, probably better than he did himself, how he and his administration would react. Similarly, Ahmadinejad and Chavez and even Gadhafi know how Obama is going to react. Perhaps the last person in the world who didn't understand that Obama's reactions are always weak and self-interested was Hosni Mubarak. And you can bet that no one will make that mistake again.

Now, what that means in practical terms is that the United States' hands are tied to a certain extent, and determined and definitive action at this point in the process is a near impossibility. But that shouldn't stop the President, at the very least, from making the case for moral action.

The President of the United States – whoever he is – should, at a very minimum, speak clearly and concisely about world events, if not for the purpose of affecting these events directly then at least to reassure the American people and the greater global community that he recognizes the crisis, to inform them of his estimation of the dangers involved, and to include them in the discussion about what, if anything, might be done in response. For better or worse, the President's opinion matters and it can help forge the opinion of the nation as a whole. What pray tell, should American's think of this whole mess? And what can they expect? Surely, this isn't a question that the nation's editorialists, columnists, commentators, and independent research providers should decide on their own, is it?

The United States remains, after all, the last bastion on the face of the earth of what was once called simply “morality,” but which now must be distinguished as “Judeo-Christian morality,” the foundation of which is the sacredness of human life and the notion that every individual *must* be treated as infinitely valuable. Given this, the President of the United States has an obligation to be involved, intimately and seriously, in any and all global discussions of mass murder and major human rights violations. The default alternative to such participation, we fear, would be the obliteration of this view of the individual and, ultimately, the slaughter of countless innocents.

In short, as president, Barack Obama has an obligation to speak clearly and forthrightly – to the people of the nation and the people of the world – even if “speaking” is all he is willing to do. And this obligation supersedes any worries about American intrusiveness. At a bare minimum, the President of the United States must demonstrate that he still understands the difference between right and wrong. To be outflanked by France and Britain, as Obama has been on the Libyan matter, is worse than embarrassing. It is dangerous.

In the meantime, our only advice for the poor, the wretched, the abused, and the slaughtered is “get used to it.” As we said, this is what Obama was elected to do. And this is what he will do. And even when he’s done doing it, the next guy is probably going to do it too. The only budget item that Americans, in aggregate, consistently tell pollsters should be cut and cut immediately is spending on foreign aid. And as the battle over reckless spending intensifies, you can bet that no one is going to want to be the guy who says, “You know what? I think Social Security checks should be smaller, but we should spend more money helping Libyans.” It’s just not going to happen.

The positive spin on events in the Middle East is that all of this represents moral progress and that freedom, liberty, and democracy will inevitably follow the defenestration of the region’s tyrants. We wouldn’t bet on it. In order for that to happen, some outside force would have to dedicate time, talent, and treasure to

ensuring that democracy is, indeed, the path followed by newly empowered mobs. And who is going to do that? Barack Obama? Be serious. China? Russia? The EU? Please.

No one is going to do it.

And that means chaos – for the foreseeable future.

## THE HOBGOBLIN OF LITTLE MINDS.

We are well aware that we rarely, if ever, say anything positive about the President of these here United States, one Barack Obama. We find the guy tiresome. And tiring. And, obviously, we disagree with him on almost everything.

Still, in the interests of outreach and the spirit of the new “civility,” we thought we should pay the guy a compliment. President Barack Obama is, as far as we can tell, the most consistent man to occupy the office in some time, at least since Reagan, and quite possibly for a long time before that as well. There is no guessing about what he wants, what he thinks, or what he will do. He has taken the mystery out of the Oval Office. Whatever the issue, whatever the problem, whatever the crisis, you know how Obama is going to react. He is consistent. We’ll give him that.

Unfortunately, what he is, more specifically, is consistently thoughtless – and no, we don’t mean that he is “thoughtless” in that he forgets Michelle’s birthday or doesn’t send flowers on Valentine’s Day. Barack Obama is thoughtless in that he doesn’t appear to *think* about anything. He doesn’t appear to believe that he has to. Policy, like taxes, is for the little people. Barack Obama doesn’t need to fret about it. He has bigger fish to fry, and he doesn’t have the time or the energy to worry about such petty annoyances as “issues” or “positions.” After all, all the issues have been solved already. Right? Or at least they’ve been discussed and their solutions determined. All the proper policies have been decided. It’s just a matter of implementing them.

For years and years, the standard liberal/mainstream line was that Ronald Reagan was a great communicator – THE Great Communicator – but little more. He was hardly a great thinker. Reagan was, in the words of the liberal ‘60s wunderkind and BCCI crook Clark Clifford, an “amiable dunce.”

When Reagan’s personal writings – letters, diaries, etc. – were released, that image was damaged, justly and irreparably. As it turned out, Reagan thought a great deal about policy. And he wrote about it quite coherently and imaginatively. He was, in many ways, the precise opposite of the popular perception of him. He was careful, logical, inquisitive, and thoughtful. As amiable as he was, he was anything but a dunce.

Barack Obama, by contrast, has always been the beneficiary of a conventional wisdom that deems him “brilliant.” Like all Democrats, he’s really, really smart. He went to Columbia, after all, and then to Harvard. And a guy can’t get degrees from two Ivies without being a genius, can he? (Unless, of course, that guy is George W. Bush.)

We’re not sure where this reputation came from, but we do know that, again by contrast to Reagan, it isn’t based on Obama’s personal writing. The guy is not yet 50, and already he’s written two memoirs. And both of them are about the same thing – him. There’s no policy wonkishness. There’s no description of deeply held principles. There’s no deep and insightful thought of any kind in Obama’s books. It’s just him. Which, of course, is the subject about which he most likes to think.

The perfect example of Obama’s “consistency” on policy can be seen in his recent reaction to the unrest in the Middle East. A great many conservatives – ourselves included – have been critical of Obama’s handling of this crisis. Some, including the historian and classicist Victor Davis Hanson, have gone even further, accusing Obama of being woefully inconsistent on the matter. “Obama,” Hanson writes, has been contradictory, erratic, and late in almost every breaking development from the Middle East the last

30 days.” Not to contradict Hanson, whom we admire very much, but this is, at best, a misinterpretation of Obama and his plan for action.

While it is true that Obama has seemed not to know what he is doing, that is superficial and only in an immediate, heat-of-the-moment sense. In the broader sense, the more extensive context of policy for dealing with the Middle East and its current unrest, Obama knows exactly what he wants to do. And what he wants to do is exactly what Democrats have always done – or at least have done since the 1970s. As the *Politico* reported two weeks ago:

Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, will argue in a major address Friday evening that the nation should “strengthen” — not “starve” — the world body.

The address is the first in a series of speeches — to continue this spring — making the case to the American people for why the U.N. matters to national security, and detailing how it is being improved. The ambassador will be speaking to the World Affairs Council of Oregon in Portland.

Where did Obama go for action on Iran? The U.N. Where did he go for action on Libya this weekend? The U.N. Where will he go because he is frustrated with Bibi Netanyahu on the issue of settlements? Wanna guess?

The problem isn’t that the U.N. – which currently has Libya seated on its Human Rights Council – is a sick, twisted joke and is the wrong forum for serious action on serious matters. Or at least it’s not *just* that the U.N. is a sick, twisted joke and is the wrong forum for serious action on serious matters. The problem is that the reflex to defer to the United Nations is completely and utterly thoughtless. It’s devoid of imagination, leadership, or even serious inquiry. It’s the leftist default position. And the fact that it never works is,

apparently, inconsequential. To Obama, it's what "we" do – with "we" being defined as good and righteous liberals.

More than one conservative observer has used the events in Wisconsin these past couple of weeks to label the Democratic Party the party of "reactionaries." This, of course, is meant as an insult in addition to a description, since the left has always screeched about the nastiness of the Republican "reactionaries" in this country.

This is all well and good, we suppose, and certainly we have called the Democrats "reactionaries" ourselves, dating back at least 11 years to the 2000 presidential election. But the reactionary label misses the broader negligence embraced by the current administration. Reactionary, in general, indicates resistance to change or a desire to return to the policies of a previous era. This certainly describes most of the left today, but it also ignores the thoughtlessness even in the extremist positions embraced by Obama, et al.

When Obama is confronted by issues of policy or politics, he can't help but gravitate immediately and unthinkingly toward the furthest left position available. Recession troubling you? How about \$900 billion in stimulus to ease your pain? A black professor gets arrested outside of his own house in Cambridge? Well, the cops must be stupid. A governor with a budget shortfall needs to cut spending and therefore wants to limit the impact of public-sector collective bargaining? Well, he must be anti-union.

When Obama was elected, he decided that his priorities would be the same as those of every other Democrat in the past half-century: stimulus and health care. Never mind that the world had changed, was changing, and would continue to change. Never mind that the great and much-admired public health care plans in the rest of the world – from Canada to Great Britain – were moving in the opposite direction, having recognized that the conflict between cost and quality of care puts government in an awkward and untenable position. Never mind that the money for the plan didn't exist or that most people wanted jobs,

not health care to be the priority. Health care had to be passed. And it had to be passed . . . well . . . because.

During the debate over health care reform, the media and the Democrats in Congress made a big deal about the fact that reform had been a priority for the party since the days of Truman – as if that somehow lent it credence. For some reason, Obama agreed that this meant he had to act. But it didn't mean he had to act on anything coherent or constant. He'd just make it up as he went along – just like he did everything else. Rhyme? Who needs it? Reason? What's that for? Let's just do this, because "reform" needs to happen, and this is our shot.

Two years ago, just after Obama was inaugurated, he gave his first address to a joint session of Congress. It wasn't technically a "State of the Union" address, since he really couldn't give one, having been in office only a couple of days. But it was, for the most part, the new presidents' equivalent. After his much ballyhooed *tour de force*, the author and conservative intellectual Charles Murray lamented the new president's thoughtlessness:

About halfway through the speech, my wife, watching me mutter darkly at the television screen, said: "Why are you so upset? He hasn't said anything." And that pretty much sums it up.

I know the speech was supposed to be upbeat and not for policy wonks.

But I'm worried that it's not just a matter of what he chooses to put in speeches, but what he knows. It looks very much as if the president is oblivious to everything we've learned about social programs and educational reforms in the last 40 years – and by "we" I include policy analysts on the left as well as right. The guy never indicates that he is aware that we've tried a whole bunch of the same stuff he wants to try and evaluated it repeatedly and – read my lips – it doesn't work.

Two years on, and there's still no indication that Obama is aware of much of anything regarding the likelihood of policy success. Or, if he is aware, there is no indication that he cares. He doesn't appear to have read much history. He doesn't appear to understand much social science. And he doesn't appear to give a damn either way. He knows what he knows and that's all that matters.

The irony in all of this is that this is precisely what the left thought of George W. Bush. He didn't know anything and didn't want to know anything. They believed this, of course, even though Bush demonstrated a remarkable willingness to change and a remarkable willingness to abandon the failed policies of previous Republican administrations, including his father's. Bush was anything but perfect – far from it, in fact – but the idea that he was unthinking or inflexibly wedded to ideology is laughable. Indeed, that was one of the most frustrating things about Bush, his inconsistent application of ideology.

That is not, by contrast, Obama's problem. Like we said, if nothing else, the man is consistent – always and unflappably. Think about his priorities just for a minute: a stronger U.N., “green” jobs, high speed rail, greater government “investment” in society, and so on. This isn't an agenda. It's liberal boiler plate. And it's worse than useless – assuming of course that your goal is to address the problems facing this country and the world.

If, by contrast, your goal is to figure out what Obama is going to do next on any given issue, it's invaluable. Just figure out the left has been saying about the issue since 1970 and expect that this is where Obama will come down. That's who he is. That's what he does. He's consistent. Whatever that's worth.

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