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THEY SAID IT

When I saw that John McCain had picked Sarah Palin as his running mate this morning, I was on the elliptical trainer, and my rage propelled me to the most furious workout I've had in a while.

It's always exciting to see women enter the political fray at higher levels. But a lot of feminists out there are appalled by the cynicism and condescension inherent in this choice. It's as though the McCain camp believes our irrational she-hormones will lead us, like sheep, to pull the lever for any candidate who looks like us – even if she has a strong record, as Palin does, of standing *against* women's interests....

It's no rare thing for the right wing to use prominent women to keep the rest of us down. But just because Sarah Palin *is* a woman doesn't mean she's *good* for women. And female voters know that.

Sarah Seltzer, "A Feminist Appalled by Palin," *The Huffington Post*, August 29, 2008.

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH DEMOCRATIC WOMEN?

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the fiscal 2011 budget confrontation is the part dealing with abortion.

We can't really say that this issue has been "undercovered," since most major newspapers mentioned the Planned Parenthood bit, and the *Wall Street Journal's* William McGurn penned a column on it. But we do think that the great significance that this issue had on the budget battle, and may have on future political skirmishes, has been largely overlooked, despite the attention paid.

For those who may have missed it, the principal hold up in the budget debate was the funding of Planned Parenthood. As *Politico* describes it:

The low point may have come Thursday night.

House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) had spent more than an hour meeting with President Barack Obama in the Oval Office, inching toward a deal to avert a shutdown, but he kept insisting that it include a prohibition against federal funding for Planned Parenthood.

That was a nonstarter for Obama. As the meeting was breaking up, Vice President Joe Biden told the speaker, in no uncertain terms, that his demand was unacceptable. If that became the deal breaker, Biden said, he would "take it to the American people," who would presumably punish the GOP for shutting down the government over an ideological issue.

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“They were faced with a choice – they would either have to give in or shut down the government,” said a senior administration official, describing how the negotiations went from there.

As *Politico* notes, Team Obama tried to spin this as a sign that the GOP is ideologically radicalized on abortion. But, in fact, it tends to show precisely the opposite. As the aforementioned Mr. McGurn put it:

According to press accounts leaked by Democratic aides, House Speaker John Boehner argued for the funding cut late into the evening. The president answered, “Nope, zero.” He then said, “John, this is it.” Mr. Boehner accepted the budget deal without that cut.

A Republican aide confirmed more or less the same account to me. He said it was “chilling” to see how inflexible Mr. Obama was.

What we have, then, is a president who was essentially willing to sell out the rest of his party to ensure that he could save Planned Parenthood, despite the fact that PP is, technically speaking, forbidden by law from using taxpayer funds to pay for abortions. Obama had said, prior to negotiations, that a \$30 billion cut was a ceiling. And yet he agreed to a number far closer to the \$40 billion most Republicans wanted. And he did so all to save Planned Parenthood. The question with which we are left, then, is why?

The easy answer is that Obama is an ideologue, as McGurn suggests, which may also have the advantage of being true. But a more likely explanation can be found in two recent polls, one from Gallup and one from the Pew Research Center. First, Gallup:

The latest Gallup Daily tracking three-day average shows 41% of Americans approving of the job Barack Obama is doing as president. That ties his low

as president, which he registered three times previously -- twice in August 2010 and once in October 2010

Obama’s approval rating in April 12-14 polling is down most among independents when compared with his 2011 average to date as well as his term average among this group. Currently, 35% of independents approve of the president, nine points off his average from independents this year

President Obama is now as unpopular as he has been at any time since he became president.

Next, we have this from Pew, as relayed by Ronald Brownstein of *The National Journal*:

The latest Pew Research Center national poll released today underscores how slender a beachhead President Obama has established among whites more than two years into his presidency.

Obama’s best group in the white electorate remains well-educated women, who tend toward more liberal positions on social issues as well as greater receptivity to government activism. In the new poll, 56 percent of college-educated white women said they approved of Obama’s performance. That’s a slight improvement from the 52 percent of such women who voted for him in 2008, according to the Edison Research exit poll. It’s also a big improvement from the 43 percent of college-plus white women who backed Democratic House candidates in 2010. (Well-educated white women provided substantially more support for Democrats in some key 2010 Senate

races, including contests in Colorado, California and Wisconsin.)

The rest of the white electorate remains deeply cool to Obama, the Pew survey found. Just 38 percent of college-educated white men said they approve of the president. That's down from the 42 percent of the vote he won from those men in 2008....

So . . . the President needs white, college-educated, socially liberal women. And white, college-educated, socially liberal women who somehow believe that abortion represents the epitome of the feminist movement need Planned Parenthood. *Et voila*, as the French might say.

In some ways, this is a replay of the second term of the Clinton administration, only this time, the president doesn't need the alleged feminists to debase themselves by defending him for carrying on with an intern only a couple of years older than his daughter in return for his defense of abortion. This president only needs their political support. The debasing business they can continue to do on their own.

What this suggests to us is that the next 19 months are likely to be more about cultural issues than most political experts currently believe. Right now, the conventional wisdom holds that the only issues that matter are the economy and the nation's fiscal balance. We'd agree that these matter most, but we wouldn't sell the cultural issues short. Abortion in particular.

First of all, as we have said repeatedly, there is no real way to distinguish between fiscal and cultural issues. They are part and parcel of the same beliefs about the relationship between government and its citizens, the same notion of the nature of the social contract and the moral foundations of society. If you believe that government exists to perfect man and society, then invariably you expect it to spend a great deal of man's money to do so. On the other hand, if you believe that government exists merely to guarantee the rights of every individual to life, liberty, and property (or

the pursuit of happiness, depending on which version of the social contract you are reading), then you expect government to be smaller, less intrusive, and considerably less costly than it is today.

Second, as the budget battle suggests, the Democrats, and President Obama in particular, have considerable reason to exploit social issues. With a compliant media, Obama and a handful of Democratic women in Congress will do their utmost, once again, to make it appear that they are merely playing defense against the mean, nasty, insensitive, religio-kooks, when, in fact, they will be playing offense. They will be looking to "remind" single women that Obama's reelection is the only thing that stands between them and a return to the dark days of coat hangers, back alleys, and all sorts of other dreadful horrible, awful, no good, very bad things.

In 2004, Thomas Frank wrote a best-selling book entitled *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, which contends that rabid, right-wing nut cases have duped poor, stupid Kansans into voting against their best economic interests by waving the bloody flag of cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage in their faces.

One wonders if someone might not be able to write a sequel entitled *What's the Matter with Marin County?* exploring why so many college-educated women allow themselves to be "manipulated" into voting against their economic interests by the culture warriors of the left. Such a book would never be published, of course, for fear of offending the easily offended. But it would, in our opinion, better capture the state of the culture wars, their application over the last several weeks, and their likely role over the next 18 months or so.

The final reason to expect a "return" of the culture wars and especially of the battle over abortion is that they have never gone away, despite the insistence to the contrary and the relative prominence of fiscal matters in the current political debate.

We have a little confession to make. In the last issue of this newsletter, we said that we didn't really know much about Michele Bachmann other than the fact that she is the darling of the Tea Party and many Tea Partiers' preferred candidate for president. That's not entirely true. We know a little bit more about her than that. We know, for example, that she is a mother of five, who was a tax attorney, but who decided to quit her well paying job to stay home as a full-time mother while pregnant with her fourth child. We also know that part of the reason that she did that is because she and her husband were also, at that point, becoming foster parents. Over the years, Bachmann raised five children of her own, and 23 *foster children, all at-risk teenage girls*, providing them with as much love, discipline, education, and nurturing as a woman possibly could. And then she went to Washington to serve her nation.

We also know that the left – and the “feminist” left in particular – hates her.

The left's hatred for Mrs. Bachmann is similar, though less substantial, at this point anyway, to its hatred of Sarah Palin, another purported “darling” of the Tea Party. Mrs. Palin, you will note, has five children as well, the fifth of which, Trig, has Down Syndrome. You may also note that roughly 90% of the women who are given an in utero diagnosis of a Down Syndrome baby choose to abort that baby, out of respect for “quality of life” concerns. Mrs. Palin, obviously, did not.

The political left and its allies in the media would have us believe that Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann are disliked and mocked because they are Tea Partiers and nutcases and, as “comedian” Bill Maher called them, “bimbos.” But nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, the left hates them because they are, as feminist icon Gloria Steinem said (about Palin), “the wrong kind of” women. They represent a feminism that not only opposes abortion, but embraces traditional womanhood, that celebrates motherhood. Both women are mothers. Both women are strong mothers. And yet both have managed to be wildly successful outside the home as well.

Both Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann represent something that traditional leftist feminism said was impossible, namely success without compromise, power without sacrifice of femininity, fulfillment without abandonment of motherhood. And for that, they *must* be destroyed. They are a threat to feminism, a threat unlike any that has come before. They are as big a threat as any risk to Planned Parenthood or the prospect of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. They could kill the movement.

Assuming Bachmann runs for the Republican presidential nomination – and that is what we are assuming she will do – you can expect for a ridiculous amount of energy to be spent on destroying her. If Palin gets into the race too, there will hardly be time for anyone on the left or in the mainstream press to do anything else.

Please note, this is not wild speculation on our part. This is all part of the same phenomenon on display two weeks ago when President Obama sat down with Speaker of the House John Boehner and agreed to cut the budget as long as he could save Planned Parenthood. The culture wars matter still, and they matter most to the left. They matter to the erstwhile irrelevant feminists who are scared to death that the irrelevancy they began cultivating with their defense of Bill Clinton will finally destroy them. They matter to the media that could not stand it if their guy were somehow defeated on their watch. And they matter to Team Obama itself, which desperately needs those scared feminists, in large part because it has no one else.

You may think that this election will be about health care, taxes, deficits, and debt. And it may be, to some extent. But it will also be about abortion. Because, pathetically, that's all they have.

WE DON'T MEAN TO SCARE YOU, BUT... : A NOVEL.

Neither of us here at The Political Forum has ever been much of a fiction writer. One of us tried once to write “the Great American Novel,” and actually came up with quite a decent story line, only to have the damn thing fall apart in that tricky “writing” stage. The other of us is far more practical, or should we say, more aware of his artistic limitations.

Be that as it may, we have decided to try our hand today at a little creative writing, that is, to let our imaginations run just a bit. To imagine, for example, that Ronald Reagan had decided to retire from politics in 1976 when he lost the GOP nomination to Gerald Ford, and had thus allowed Jimmy Carter a second term.

The scene opens in the spring of 1980. The sun is shining; the birds are chirping; the weather is warming up after a long, cold winter. Yet, a pall hangs over the country. In fact, just nine months earlier, President Carter had given a ghastly address to American public that became known to history as his “malaise speech,” in which he spoke highly pessimistically about “the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.”

Nevertheless, he is running for a second term, albeit against a stiff headwind. The country is in rough shape. He knows it. The people know it. And worst of all, the rest of the world knows it. Needless to say, his bid for the party’s nomination is not unopposed. Both Ted Kennedy and California Governor Jerry Brown have mounted primary challenges, and Kennedy actually appears to have the capacity to win, in spite of himself.

On the other side of the ticket, the frontrunner is the little-known former Congressman, former Ambassador to the United Nations, and former Director of Central Intelligence George H.W. Bush. His principal competition comes from Congressman John Anderson of Illinois and Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee. Ronald Reagan is clearing brush on his ranch in California.

The Soviet Union has troops in Afghanistan. This has prompted Carter to come as close to rattling a sword as he ever will. That is to say that he announced that, in retaliation for the invasion of this Central Asian nation, America will boycott the summer Olympics in Moscow. Meanwhile, some 52 Americans are being held captive by the new Islamist death cult in Iran. Communists have taken over in Nicaragua. Inflation is rising quickly. Energy shortages have returned with a vengeance. Interest rates are skyrocketing, and the nation is headed into recession.

Now, fast forward a bit. It’s November. Carter has just beaten Bush. Bush is a nice man and was a good candidate. But he had nothing particularly special to offer. *And it is very difficult to beat an incumbent, even a really bad incumbent, with nothing special; a guy who is a good and competent politician, looks nice, comes from a nice family, does well enough on TV, has had an impressive career, but who is, in almost every way, totally unexceptional.* Like all incumbents, Carter had the advantage. And he squeaked it out. So he has been elected to a second term, the first president since Eisenhower to be granted the privilege.

Fast forward again, this time to the summer of 1984. Carter’s second term is nearing an end. His Vice President Walter Mondale is the party’s nominee and, despite the dismal state of the country, is actually leading his Republican opponent, Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, in the polls.

The Soviet Union has grown much stronger during Carter’s second term. Not only had Carter refrained from challenging their aggressive behavior in any meaningful way in any part of the globe, but he had come to the conclusion that the Soviet Union was here to stay and that the United States would have to learn to live in harmony with it. This view had become gospel for him in 1982 when his close advisor, the liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., had returned from a trip to Moscow and had publicly declared that, “those in the United States who think the Soviet Union is on the verge of economic and social collapse” are “wishful thinkers who are only kidding themselves.”

Largely unchallenged in the world, the Soviets have re-imposed order upon Afghanistan and, indeed, throughout much of their empire. Capitalizing on unrest in the Middle East, Soviet Premiers Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and current leader Viktor Cherbikov (who, like Andropov had been head of the KGB) have exacerbated America's energy and inflation problems by driving up the price of oil, carefully harnessing their own supplies and threatening the supplies of Middle Eastern providers, most notably the Saudis, who are convinced that President Carter cannot be trusted to come to their defense if necessary and are confused by his often awkward and irresolute enthusiasm for leftist definitions of "human rights." The high price of oil has had the additional effect of filling the Soviet coffers and compensating for the otherwise disastrous economic policies of the otherwise disastrous Communist economists.

In the broader Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran has morphed into the Islamic Shi'ite Republic and now encompasses Iran, Bahrain, and much of the Shi'ite areas of what was Iraq. Iraq, you may recall, attacked Iran in 1980, starting a long and bloody war. Sometime early in Carter's second term, the Iranian Mullahs and their messianic Islamic warriors began to get the upper hand, which prompted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to beg for help from President Carter. Carter, again playing his on-again/off-again game with human rights, refused, and it was only a matter of time before Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his Islamic Revolution had taken over the Shi'ite dominated areas of Iraq and the oil that came along with it. He then proceeded to consolidate power and join in the Soviet effort to exacerbate American troubles. The 52 American hostages, by the way, were all publicly executed in 1983 as infidels.

Israel is threatened as it hasn't been since its modern rebirth, despite having signed an historic peace accord with Egypt at President Carter's insistence. Both the region's Shi'ite radicals (in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon) and its Sunni radicals (in Saudi Arabia and Egypt) have decided yet again to scapegoat the "Zionist" entity for their own problems and to wage figurative and literal war against

it, this time with Persian backing and a weakened United States. Notably, the Egyptian "peace treaty" was worth less than the paper it was printed on, precipitating the assassination of President Anwar Sadat and a successful Islamic revolution, led by Sadat's assassin Khalid Islambouli and funded by Iran.

At home, times continue to be tough. "The Great Recession" that began just before the last presidential contest (in October 1980), continues to linger. Although economic growth has returned, it has been minimal, halting, and far less than would be expected in the midst of recovery. Inflation continues to worry most Americans, as do interest rates. The President, oblivious to the notion advanced by some in the Republican Party – namely Congressman Jack Kemp and Senator William Roth – that tax cuts might actually spur economic growth, insists on continuing his policy of Keynesian spending followed by tax hikes. The recovery has been slow to provide jobs, and unemployment remains far above its historic average. A banking crisis haunts the nation, driven by problems in the Savings and Loans, and the public in general believes overwhelmingly that the country is "on the wrong track" according to public opinion surveys.

Do you want us to stop yet? Because we want to stop. Painting this nasty picture is depressing. Unfortunately, though, it has a purpose.

Imagine: a world with Islamist radicals on the rise throughout the Middle East and threatening Israel; with a super power rising and holding undue influence over the economic future of the United States; with oil prices skyrocketing; with American foreign policy predicated on dubious and inconsistent notions of human rights; with Communist enemies in Latin America; with hyper-inflation and interest rate hikes lurking in the American economic future; with a faltering and jobless economic recovery from deep recession; with tax-and-spend Keynesians STILL dominating the economic halls of the federal government; with a wholly unserious, unskilled, and self-righteous, moralizing amateur in the White House;

and, *worst of all*, with absolutely no one of any stature to threaten to oust him from the presidency and save the nation from a second term.

But you don't have to imagine this. We and countless others enjoy talking about the state of politics and picking on Obama by comparing him to Jimmy Carter. And that's fun, in a way. Until reality sets in and we realize that this time, "Carter" isn't going to be followed by Reagan, because Reagan doesn't exist. Instead we get Newt. And the Donald. And Ron Paul. And some other guys whose names we forget, largely because they are . . . well . . . forgettable.

Worse yet, in the Carter story, at least we had Paul Volcker, who wanted nothing more in this world than to protect the dollar. In our world, we have Helicopter Ben, who apparently was beaten up as a kid by a dollar bill and now wants to see it punished, harshly.

Of course, there is no Soviet Union today. God bless him, Ronald Reagan didn't believe the likes of Arthur Schlesinger. But there are other nasties around, and as with Carter, we have a president who has difficulty with friend/enemy issues. Or perhaps he just doesn't care, which is probably worse.

Last Tuesday evening, as we were jotting down our thoughts for possible story ideas for this week's newsletter, we thought, instinctively, about Obama's big speech the next day on fiscal policy and the need to address entitlements and to get the nation's debt under control. Having read both Congressman Paul Ryan's proposal and the reaction to it; and having watched this president for going-on four years now, we were expecting him to try to BS his way through the speech, as he always does. And we thought: if he does this; if he thinks that he can fake it, he will once again misread the mood of the electorate and this time he will do it so badly that it will cost him a second term.

And then came the speech. And it was worse – *far* worse – than we expected. He BS'ed obscenely. He played politics, constantly, and poorly. He faked it, half-heartedly even. He was, in short, just about as

disingenuous and dishonest as any president we can remember, including the one who claimed to need to know what the definition of "is" was.

But somehow the "he will lose" bit didn't really seem to stick. He *may* lose, of course. But it is by no means a sure thing, as awful, selfish, and politically inept though he may be.

We would love to believe that any one of the Republican contenders we see before us could beat him. We would love furthermore to believe that any of them could make a competent president. But we just don't believe it on either count. This isn't to pick on any of them. Really, it isn't. Like the George Bush character in our fictional tale above, it will take somebody rather more than nice and smart and modestly talented to unseat an incumbent, particularly one with the entirety of the mainstream media in his corner.

The two Republicans who would like to believe they best meet these standards – Newt Gingrich and Mike Huckabee – are almost self-disqualifying, in that they both represent something nearly as antithetical to the public mood right now as Obama does. Newt's fatal flaw being a rather pronounced self absorption and Huck's being a similarly pronounced propensity to harness the power of the state to micromanage the lives of citizens, merely from a less "progressive" cultural vantage point.

Beyond that, there's not a whole lot to get excited about. There is time, of course, for more and more serious candidates to get into the race. And one of them may prove surprisingly impressive. Who knows? What we do know, though, is that there will be no savior. No matter how often each of the candidates insists otherwise for the next 15 months or so, not a single one of them is Ronald Reagan. And not a single one will ever be.

All of which means that there is a fairly good chance that Barack Obama will win reelection, as disastrous as that might be. This is, after all, a man who actually has the temerity to whine – to the media nonetheless –

about how he misses the anonymity of his former life, when he could hop in the car unshaven on a Saturday morning and go squeeze some melons, while at the very same moment launching his *\$1 billion* on-line re-election campaign, a campaign in which he could not appear less interested.

Last week, after Obama's bizarre and incredibly disengaged address, the screenwriter and blogger Roger L. Simon noted the following about the President.

Apparently, or so I have heard on the rumor mill, the troops inside the White House are well aware of this disengagement. They talk of how uncomfortable they feel listening to the president discuss sports for the first half-hour of a forty-five minute foreign policy meeting, seemingly unaware (or uncaring) of the urgent matters at hand. Perhaps this accounts for Rahm Emanuel's quick exit from the administration. Surely, if he remained, bigger things awaited than even mayor of Chicago.

What does this mean? Again, who knows? But we don't imagine that it means anything good. Not that we can imagine much that's good right now, as our foray into fiction above should have revealed.

If there is anything positive we can manage to put in this piece, it's that the world will, in fact, be radically different before the 2012 election is decided. In the current atmosphere, 12 weeks is an eternity, and 12 months is virtually unfathomable. To paraphrase Emerson, events are in the saddle and ride mankind. We can only hope that these events are of the sort that don't do too much damage to the nation while doing a great deal of damage to the election chances of the guy in the White House, who doesn't seem to want the job anyway.

If he wins a second term, and if he governs as disinterestedly as his current behavior suggests he will, then we simply don't have the imagination -- or the stomach -- to try to write the chapter describing the world four years hence. A picture could help complete the scene, we suppose. Perhaps one of Gustave Sore's famous illustrations from Book One of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

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