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## THEY SAID IT

No matter what side one takes in the Israeli-Arab dispute, certain facts are immutable. The first is that no matter how slick Jim Baker talks, he isn't going to convince Israel to give up land to Arab states, so long as these states are publicly pledged to Israel's destruction. Consider this.

Israel is smaller than either New Hampshire or Vermont. On most world maps, it is too small to have its six letter name written within it. Its population is less than five million. It is surrounded by nations with combined land masses of millions of square miles and with greater combined populations than the United States. And most of these countries, at one time or another, in one way or another, with guns, tanks, terrorists, or oil money have tried to destroy it . . . .

It isn't a question of whether Israel should or shouldn't make those concessions. It is a simple fact that it won't. The Middle East is a dangerous place and Israel's position there is already dangerous enough without gambling on the sincerity of Arab promises. The chances are it won't get an opportunity to make that decision anyway because no Arab leader, especially one of the more dangerous ones, is going to renounce his country's pledge to destroy Israel. And even if one tried it, he almost certainly couldn't unite the citizens of his country behind his action and he definitely couldn't bring his neighbors on board because each is hated by his neighbors.

Mark Melcher, "Bush's Fatal Attraction To Middle East Diplomacy Bodes Trouble For His Presidency," *Strategy Weekly*, April 21, 1991.

## THE OBAMA DOCTRINE.

More than half way through his presidency, we are still not sure what to make of Barack Obama. Is he a complete and utter fool who ignorantly and haphazardly stumbles his way through foreign and domestic affairs making a hash of the country and its global interests? Or is he a savant of some sort who manages to cobble together complicated strategies designed to achieve disparate and sometimes abstruse policy ends, some of which he would prefer the public to understand as little about as possible? Just when we think we have the guy figured out, he goes and does something new, something novel and objectively foolish and perilous that causes us to begin the process of reassessment all over again.

Consider if you will his much-ballyhooed address last week to the State Department on his "new" vision for the Middle East. The two "take-aways" from the speech, obviously, were that Barack has, in many ways, embraced the "freedom agenda" of the last administration and that he expects the acceptance of pre-1967

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borders to be the starting point for the negotiations which he intends to impose upon the Israelis and the Palestinians in pursuit of a two-state solution.

This second point, clearly, has been the more controversial of the two and has caused a great deal of consternation among a great many people, not the least of whom is Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who was in the country for the address, who met with Obama the following day and rejected the terms out of hand, and who will address a joint session of Congress tomorrow. Obama's demand that Israel accept the '67 borders as a starting point was both a rhetorical and a substantive break from the policy of his predecessors, dating back to 1967. And the President's decision to make this address the forum for unveiling this break in policy was odd to say the least.

In the context of the speech, the bit about the Israelis and the Palestinians was more or less an afterthought. And the line about the 1967 borders was a throw-away line. Yet it dominated the coverage of the address, to the point where almost everything else about it was ignored if not completely forgotten.

The question then is why was this bit included? Is Obama really so stupid that he didn't know that this would be the part of the address on which everyone focused? Is he really so naïve and so completely and utterly out of his league that he wouldn't know that the rest of his "new" and important policy would be instantaneously forgotten with all attention focused on this one throw-away line?

Or, rather, is Obama so smart, so clever, and so subtle that he included the bit about the 1967 borders specifically *because* he knew it would be the part of the address on which everyone focused? Did he drop this policy bomb in at the end knowing full well that the rest of his "new" and important policy would be instantaneously forgotten with all attention focused on this one throw-away line?

In short, does Obama wish we had paid attention to the rest of the speech? Or does he hope with all his might that we didn't?

The general consensus among those who paid attention to the entirety of Obama's address was that it was this president's "Bush moment," that point in time at which he abandoned all pretenses to the contrary and fully embraced what has come to be known as the Bush Doctrine, which posits that Middle Eastern security can best be enhanced through the promotion of democracy among that region's nations. The renowned neoconservative historian and author Max Boot put it this way:

As John [Podhoretz] and Jonathan [Tobin] have already noted, today's speech at the State Department marks Barack Obama's emergence as a full-fledged, born-again neocon firmly in the George W. Bush mold . . . .

Obama, like Bush, is a neocon because he has been mugged by events—in his case by the Arab Spring which has exposed the fragility of dictatorships that he once thought, in the fashion of his predecessor's father, George H.W. Bush, he could make deals with . . . .

[T]oday at the State Department he spoke from a position of moral authority, telling Middle Eastern dictators that the U.S. will no longer tolerate a situation where "in too many countries, power has been concentrated in the hands of the few." He even specifically repudiated the Realpolitik policy he had once favored, saying that "we have a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals." From now on, he announced, "it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy."

That's a nice thought. And certainly it notes a real and pronounced shift in rhetoric from Obama; one that unquestionably brings him much closer to Bush than he had been previously. And Boot consciously and intentionally implies that Obama fits the classic

definition of a neoconservative as described by Irving Kristol, which is to say that he is a liberal who has been mugged by reality. But is this even true?

Is supporting the overthrow of Mubarak to be replaced by the Muslim Brotherhood a concession to “the self-determination of individuals”? Does the conversion from Western-backed despotism to religio-fundamentalist autocracy constitute a “transition to democracy”? Does pretending that the spirit that moves the “rebellions” of the Middle East is the same spirit of freedom and liberty that has historically moved rebellions in the West constitute a bow to reality? Or is the President, and Max Boot for that matter, just full of . . .well . . . it?

We appreciate that there are those who want desperately for Obama to be Bush and for Egypt to be Iraq and so on. But there are differences here that make it impossible to pretend that this address represents anything but a continuation of the Obama doctrine, i.e. Obama choosing to abdicate any American responsibility for the nature and direction of developments in the Middle East and instead opting to support “indigenous” developments. True, Obama blathers on a great deal about democracy and liberty and other Bush-ly sounding sentiments. But unlike his predecessor, he appears unaware that such things are rarely, if ever, self-generated or self-perpetuated. Whereas Bush supported his notions of democracy with troops, open-ended military and rebuilding commitments, and a dedication to the construction of democratic institutions, Obama backs his notions of democracy with mere words.

More to the point, because Bush’s policy involved the actual investment of American political, military, and human capital, it also allowed the direction of revolutionary urges and the desire to escape oppression to be directed toward positive ends and, most importantly, to be directed against those who would merely replace one form of despotism with another, thereby negating the very notion of democratic change but also threatening American national interests in the process. When Bush toppled Saddam, for example, he did not leave Iraq to Zarqawi and the Islamists, but instead nearly sacrificed his

entire presidency to prevent such an outcome. Obama, by contrast, seems perfectly willing to leave post-Mubarak Egypt to the Muslim Brotherhood, the late Zarqawi’s intellectual brothers-in-arms.

During his speech, the either shockingly vapid or shockingly clever Obama compared the revolutionaries of Egypt and the broader Middle East to the great civil rights warriors of the American past:

There are times in the course of history when the actions of ordinary citizens spark movements for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has been building up for years. In America, think of the defiance of those patriots in Boston who refused to pay taxes to a King, or the dignity of Rosa Parks as she sat courageously in her seat. So it was in Tunisia, as that vendor’s act of desperation tapped into the frustration felt throughout the country. Hundreds of protesters took to the streets, then thousands. And in the face of batons and sometimes bullets, they refused to go home – day after day, week after week – until a dictator of more than two decades finally left power.

There is only one word in the English language that can adequately describe this, and it is, unfortunately, one that we cannot use in a family publication such as this. One can expect, though, that when Mark goes out to feed the cows this afternoon he runs a reasonable risk of stepping in it.

If we had to guess, we’d suppose that Obama is not actually stupid enough to believe that people determined to impose Sharia law – which includes female genital mutilation – on the world’s most populous Arab nation are in any way akin to Rosa Parks, and that he is, instead, simply trying to make the “indigenous” revolutionaries sound palatable because of ulterior motives. But then, as we said above, we can’t really be sure with this guy. In fact, it is entirely possible that he actually believes this drivel.

In any case, the net effect of what he is doing here is telling the peoples of the region that the United States is just fine with whatever they want to do, as long as the impetus for their actions can be found in the desire to throw off the chains of longstanding oppression and to “change” their lives by rebelling against their authoritarian tormentors. The only exceptions he makes to this rule, ironically, are Syria and Iran – the two nations most desperately in need of change and where change would most benefit America’s global interests. In these two cases, he merely urges the dictators to institute democratic reform.

In the end, this portends disaster.

For starters, Obama has, essentially, sold out any and all remaining allies in the region, from Bahrain to Yemen, from Kuwait to Saudi Arabia. When the Bahraini Shi’ites “choose” to overthrow their oppressors – with Iranian assistance, of course – that will be just fine with Obama. When the Kuwaitis revolt against the Emir, again, that will fit Obama’s new “doctrine” nicely. And, eventually, we suppose, the revolution will come to the heart of the matter – and to the heart of Islam – with the Shi’ites again revolting, this time against the House of Saud and its “divine” right of protection of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. And for what will the Obama doctrine call in that case?

The fact of the matter is that that region’s energy-production, from Kuwait to Saudi Arabia, and its banking and trade industries, centered in the Arab Emirates, are at risk for near-term shocks and long-term setbacks at the hands of the forces that are being encouraged by the Obama doctrine in the Middle East. Democracy and opposition to autocracy are, in general, admirable qualities. But their random, lazy, and detached application is all but certain to lead to chronic exacerbation of problems rather than a resolution of them.

And that brings us back to Israel.

Whether Obama intended for his mention of the 1967 borders to be a focal point of his speech or not

is beside the point, largely because, in our opinion, any negotiations with the Palestinians are likely also to be beside the point. The most brilliant minds in the world could sit around and debate the concepts of borders, contiguous nations, the right of return, armed forces in the Jordan Valley, and all the other issues that will still have to be resolved – even if Netanyahu and Israel were to agree to Obama’s inane starting points – and none of it would matter one whit, for the fate of Obama doctrine and perhaps of Israel herself will be determined long before such negotiations ever begin.

As we have noted countless times, the fate of modern, post-revolutionary Egypt will be largely decided in just over three months. The Obama doctrine supports the idea of indigenous revolution and democracy-building. And that is precisely what we will get in Egypt in September, when the Muslim Brotherhood takes a legislative majority and begins the process of writing the country’s new constitution. As even United Nations gadfly and Egyptian presidential wannabe Mohamed ElBaradei now concedes, Egypt’s social conditions are “disintegrating”; its political condition is “a black hole”; and the Islamist groups seem best prepared and most likely to take power in September. Moreover, this Islamist power-grab will take place, ElBaradei notes, against a backdrop of “lack of tourism, no investment, and inflation.”

This last bit, the bit about the Egyptian economy, is one that we think is all too often overlooked, but which could end up determining the fate of the region. Consider for a moment the following, which was written two weeks ago by the eminent columnist and scholar Spengler (a.k.a. David P. Goldman) for *The Asia Times*:

Egypt is running out of food, and, more gradually, running out of money with which to buy it. The most populous country in the Arab world shows all the symptoms of national bankruptcy - the kind that produced hyperinflation in several Latin American countries during the 1970s and 1980s - with a deadly difference: Egypt imports half its wheat, and the collapse of its external credit

means starvation. The civil violence we have seen over the past few days foreshadows far worse to come . . . .

The Ministry of Solidarity and Social Justice is already forming “revolutionary committees” to mete out street justice to bakeries, propane dealers and street vendors who “charge more than the price prescribed by law”, the Federation of Egyptian Radio and Television reported on May 3.

According to the ministry, “Thugs are in control of bread and butane prices” and “people’s committees” are required to stop them. Posters on Egyptian news sites report sharp increases in bread prices, far in excess of the 11.5% inflation reported for April by the country’s central bank. And increases in the price of bottled propane have made the cost of the most widely used cooking fuel prohibitive.

The collapse of Egypt’s credit standing, meanwhile, has shut down trade financing for food imports, according to the chairman of the country’s Food Industry Holding Company, Dr Ahmed al-Rakaibi, chairman of the Holding Company for Food Industries. Rakaibi warned of “an acute shortage in the production of food commodities manufactured locally, as well as a decline in imports of many goods, especially poultry, meats and oils”. According to the country’s statistics agency, only a month’s supply of rice is on hand, and four months’ supply of wheat.

The country’s foreign exchange reserves have fallen by US\$13 billion, or roughly a third during the first three months of the year, Reuters reported on May 5. The country lost \$6 billion of official and \$7 billion of unofficial reserves, and had only \$24.5 billion on hand at the end of April. Capital flight probably explains most of the rapid decline. Egypt’s currency has declined by only about

6% since January, despite substantial capital flight, due to market intervention by the central bank, but the rapid drawdown of reserves is unsustainable. At this rate Egypt will be broke by September . . . .

It will look like the Latin American banana republics, but without the bananas. That is not meant in jest: few people actually starved to death in the Latin inflations. Egypt, which imports half its wheat and a great deal of the rest of its food, will actually starve.

Revolutions don’t only kill their children. They kill a great many ordinary people. The 1921 famine after the Russian civil war killed an estimated five million people, and casualties on the same scale are quite possible in Egypt as well. Half of Egyptians live on \$2 a day, and that \$2 is about to collapse along with the national currency, and the result will be a catastrophe of, well, biblical proportions.

We will presume, of course, that you caught the significance of Spengler’s projection of September as the time when Egypt will be bankrupt and facing the inevitability of starvation. As we said earlier, September is also the time when parliamentary elections will deliver the most populous Arab state into the hands of Islamist extremists. How interesting, this revolutionary business is.

Unfortunately, while the newly minted Obama doctrine will be explaining to starving, Copt-killing, clitoris-cutting, internet-destroying, Islamist dominated Egyptians how wonderful post-totalitarian life is and how Rosa Parks-ian they are, there will be this tiny little nation across the Red Sea that has served for millennia – and for six-plus decades in modern times – as the perfect scapegoat for all Arab and Muslim troubles. Add to that rising Islamist unrest in the Arabian Peninsula, Islamist saber-rattling in Syria and Syrian-dominated Lebanon, and the ongoing preparation for Endtimes in Iran, and you’ve got yourself a recipe for one helluva a blowout. And since it’s all perfectly consistent with Obama’s “democratic”

vision of the Middle East, it will therefore require no intervention; no involvement; heck, not even any serious thought on the part of the good ol' U.S. of A.

Now, Binyamin Netanyahu can go back to Tel Aviv later this week and fret all he wants to about how he was undercut and blindsided by Obama's declaration that the 1967 borders are a "starting point" for two-state negotiations. But if he does so, he will, in our estimation, be wasting his time. As things stand right now, there is a good chance that the Obama doctrine, such as it is, will have collapsed long before those negotiations ever even begin. The only question is what else will have collapsed. The Saudi monarchy? Egyptian civil society? Israel herself? Anything is possible, we're afraid.

As to whether Obama himself understands any of this, much less intends any of it, we still can't say. Evil genius? Fool? We really have no idea. But we're hoping for the latter.

And how sad is that?

## THE STRATEGIC REPUBLICANS HYPOTHESIS.

So now for the third time in two weeks and for the fourth time in just over a month, a presumed Republican frontrunner for the presidential nomination has bowed out of the race, leaving the underwhelming field intact and unthreatened. With an incumbent so seemingly beatable, why does no one seem to want to beat him?

The answer to this question, obviously, is complicated. And every candidate has different reasons for not wanting to get into the race at this point. Donald Trump, for example, declined to run because he never had any intention of running and was merely pumping up the ratings for his erstwhile flagging TV show. Beyond that, though, there are some general patterns that seem to offer some explanation as to why the "good" candidates are deciding to stay home and what that means for the potential GOP field going forward.

For all three of the legitimate candidates who backed out – Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee – the question was never whether the presidency was winnable, but *at what cost* was it winnable. Each man was more than qualified and more than capable of beating Obama. But each man also knew that to do so, he would have to make important and significant sacrifices, and to ask others in his life to do the same. And all three apparently decided that it just wasn't worth it.

Part of this, of course, is structural. It reflects the nature of the modern presidency and, more to the point, of the modern presidential campaign. Running for president is different than running for any other elective office. It requires a genuine forfeiture of an enormous portion of one's life. As Barbour put it in the statement he issued when he opted out of the race:

A candidate for president today is embracing a ten-year commitment to an all-consuming effort, to the virtual exclusion of all else. His (or her) supporters expect and deserve no less than absolute fire in the belly from their candidate.

That is, to put it mildly, a serious commitment, and one that appeals to only a few, "hardy" men or women. There has been a great deal of discussion of late about President Obama's affinity for the use of first-person pronouns in his discussion of the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, a tendency which has caused some of his critics to label him "self-absorbed" or worse, a narcissist. And while we don't dispute either characterization, we don't know why anyone would be surprised. Given the nature of the commitment, the nature of the job, and the type of person who must be willing to take on both, the surprise isn't that a narcissist or two slips through; it's that they all aren't. In any case, we should hardly be surprised that men and women with healthy egos and healthy allegiances to their families and others would think that the modern presidency and the modern presidential campaign are just one step too far.

In addition to this basic, structural matter, this race in particular presents its own specific set of problems and its own specific set of costs, all of which make it a far less attractive race for anyone who might wish to challenge Barack Obama, irrespective of his seeming infirmity as an incumbent. As the first black president, Obama represents something intangible and intangibly redemptive to liberals. There is a great deal of focus on race with regard to this President, and the overwhelming majority of it comes from the left, despite liberals' protestations to the contrary. They are obsessed with his race. They are obsessed with the "first black" president. They are obsessed with the crippling of the "white power structure." And they will be damned if they are going to let this presidency end in failure, or even a perceived failure.

In a very direct way, this represents a serious threat to a candidate like Barbour, who is from the South, who has the slow, Southern drawl, and who has a reputation for being less-than-obsessive about racial matters. In the real world, a Southern conservative who doesn't think about race continually would represent progress. But this isn't the real world. It is presidential politics. And in this world, failure to obsess about race is indicative of latent (and not-so-latent, depending upon who is making the charge) racism, particularly when one's opponent is a black man. Whatever else he may be: competent, smooth, a fund-raising virtuoso, Haley Barbour would also have been the successor to Bull Connor in this race. And he knew it. And why would he want to subject himself, his family, his friends, co-workers, and supporters to that?

Of course, it's not just about race and it's not just about "supporters" trying to destroy potential candidates. There will be plenty of candidate destruction brought by the Obama campaign itself. As John Podhoretz notes:

So why is this happening? Simple. You've probably heard that the president and his team are looking to raise \$1 billion to run on in 2012. They may make it; they may not. But what is that money to be spent on? He won't

have to spend it in a primary, it looks like. So that means the Obama team will have hundreds upon hundreds of millions of dollars to spend with one object and one object only: Destroy the eventual Republican nominee. Go after him. Drag his name through the mud. Run commercials every 15 seconds in six battleground states in which he removes wheelchairs from Medicare patients and grabs checks from Social Security recipients. And should there be a personal problem, a marital difficulty . . . well, Katie, bar the door. Imagine being Mitch Daniels, with your complex marital history, contemplating the onslaught of a negative campaign that cascades over you beginning in June 2012, just as you're trying to "define" yourself to the American people. Pretty horrible to contemplate.

Everybody in America already knows and has an opinion of Obama. It will be the Obama team's job to help everybody develop an opinion of his rival that is unabashedly hostile. And they will have the dollars to do it, though it should be said even an ad campaign in the hundreds of millions can't in themselves cast a magic spell. But it can help.

As Podhoretz notes, Mitch Daniels, the latest frontrunner to bow out, has a "complex marital history." In short, he was a married executive with three young daughters. His wife left him. He stayed and raised the girls by himself. She came back. They got remarried. As with Barbour, in the real world, this would reflect well on Daniels. After all, he did the right thing, the admirable thing. And the end result was the culmination of a great love story, apparently. But . . . one more time . . . this IS NOT the real world. And if you are Mitch Daniels, do you want to do this to your wife? To your daughters? Could you imagine anything worse than subjecting the woman you love – and lost once already – to the jackals in the media and

the political opposition, all for the crime of daring to present a differing vision for the future of the country? Does the phrase “No Thanks” seem a little inadequate for the circumstances?

We have written countless times in these pages about Gary Jacobson’s Strategic Politicians hypothesis, which posits, essentially, that high-quality Congressional candidates tend to run for office when the conditions appear to favor their party and therefore to favor their candidacy. Or to put it another way: candidates get into races when they think they have the best chances of winning.

Today, we’d like to offer a related theory, the Strategic Republicans hypothesis, which argues that high-quality Republican candidates will enter the presidential primary not simply when the conditions appear favorable for victory, but when they appear favorable for victory without exacting too high a cost.

For Barbour, the cost of being permanently labeled a racist and having to give up his entire life was too high. For Daniels the cost in emotional abuse to his family was too high. For Mike Huckabee (and for Donald Trump and Sarah Palin, for that matter) the cost in quality of life was too high. Huckabee has a nice Fox News gig. He has a nice life. He has a comfortable post-political life and enjoys preaching his political-religious creed and affecting viewers while enjoying his family. Why would he give that up to be destroyed by the media?

The candidates who are already in the race are guys like Romney and Pawlenty who have no current jobs and believe that they have nothing to hide and therefore have nothing to lose. Or they are guys like Newt who think that no matter what they have to lose personally, the country needs them so desperately that all of that is but the small sacrifice that they must make in order

to grace the nation with their magnificence. It is no coincidence, in our opinion, that we now have two Mormons running for the GOP nomination – Romney and Huntsman – given Mormons’ general reputation for personal probity. We suspect that they feel pretty comfortable that their personal lives will withstand whatever digging the White House and its media allies may do.

As for any future, potential “dream” candidates whom Republicans may wish to draft – guys like Texas Governor Rick Perry, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush – when assessing the likelihood that any one or more of these candidates may respond positively to a such an effort, one must look not only at what each stands to gain from a candidacy (the presidency, most notably), but what he stands to lose as well. We don’t know much about Perry or Christie in this regard. But we can almost guarantee you that Bush is out. Between his brother, whom the left will revile for several decades more; his customs-evading wife, Columba; and his formerly drug-addicted daughter, Noelle, Jeb Bush carries a great deal of personal baggage. Of course, none of it implicates him in any wrongdoing, or differentiates him from the rest of us, so to speak. But all of which will be used against him and used to hurt the people he loves. He’d be nuts to run. And therefore he won’t.

That’s what it’s come down to, then. Who are the Republicans going to find who is clean, confident, willing to sacrifice a decade of his life, and willing to subject his family to several years of torture, all for the privilege of inheriting all of the world’s problems? As the inimitable Michael Barone put it in his summary of the Daniels decision, given the nature of this race, “The wonder to me is not why so few men and women are running for president but why so many are.”

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