

**Stephen R. Soukup** Publisher  
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

**Mark L. Melcher** Editor  
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

## THEY SAID IT

So there he was the other night expounding on Afghanistan. Unlike [Congressional Budget Office Director] Douglas Elmendorf, the Taliban do estimate speeches, and they correctly concluded from the president's 2009 speech that all they need to do is run out the clock and all or most of the country will be theirs once more. Last week's update confirmed their estimate. "Winning" is not in Obama's vocabulary. Oh, wait. That's not true. In an earlier unestimated speech, he declared he was committed to "winning the future," "winning the future" at some unspecified time in the future being a lot easier than winning the war. In fairness, it's been two-thirds of a century since America has unambiguously won a war, but throughout that period most presidents were at least notionally committed to the possibility of victory. Obama seems to regard the very concept as something boorish and vulgar that would cause him embarrassment if it came up at dinner parties. So place your bets on how long it will be before Mullah Omar's back in town. And then ask yourself if America will have anything to show for its decade in Afghanistan that it wouldn't have had if it had just quit two weeks after toppling the Taliban in the fall of 2001 and left the mullahs, warlords, poppy barons, and pederasts to have at each other without the distraction of extravagant NATO reconstruction projects littering their beautiful land of charmingly unspoiled rubble.

Mark Steyn, "Speechworld vs. Realworld," *National Review Online*, June 25, 2011.

## AFGHANISTAN AND THE "LESSONS OF VIETNAM."

For the better part of four decades now, the sum total of the liberal contribution to national security policy in this country has been to sit idly by and screech occasionally that the nation and its leaders need to "learn the lessons of Vietnam?" Once in a while, a Democrat will rattle a sword, usually in the spirit of what our old friend SAIS Professor Michael Mandelbaum describes as "national security as social work."

It is ironic, then, given the near constant caterwauling about Vietnam and its lessons that it is the left that seems least conversant with those lessons. As we discussed *ad nauseam* throughout the second half of the Bush presidency, the left's instincts to cut-and-run from Iraq demonstrated an undeniable obliviousness to the repercussions of America's precipitous withdrawal from Southeast Asia. It was as if the re-education camps of Communist Vietnam, the flight and plight of the "boat people," and the mass slaughter of the Cambodian "killing fields" were merely tall tales fabricated by right-wing war mongers or dreamed up by Hollywood screenwriters. They didn't happen, really, did they? And if they did, who cares? And in any case, it couldn't happen again, could it?

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Subscriptions are available by contacting:

The Political Forum LLC 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842  
Phone 540.477.2696 Fax 540.477.3359 melcher@thepoliticalforum.com www.thepoliticalforum.com

Another version of ignoring the “lessons of Vietnam” is in the works this week, as President Obama decides that it is time to bring the troops home from Afghanistan. But not really. Just some of them. Kinda. Next year. And then some more after that. And then maybe some more later. But just a few now. To paraphrase the senior Senator from Massachusetts, John Kerry, back when he was a Winter Soldier: how do you ask a man to be the last to die so that a community organizer from Chicago can be re-elected president? Or something like that.

We always thought that the lesson of Vietnam – or at least one of the lessons – was that wars should only be fought when absolutely necessary and then they should be fought to win; that military objectives should be paramount in strategic planning, and that political calculations should count for nothing or almost nothing. We thought the lesson was no more – pardon our French – pussy-footing around. No more quagmires. Go. Fight. Win. Or again, something like that.

Apparently this lesson was lost on the community organizer in the White House. If there is one thing that is nearly universally agreed upon about his newly announced Afghanistan policy, it is that it is politically motivated, directed exclusively toward re-election, and, as such, contradicts the stated and established military objectives for the entire operation. Or as General David Petraeus gently put it while under oath last week: “The ultimate [drawdown] decision was a more aggressive formulation, if you will, in terms of the timeline than what we had recommended.”

By the time Barack Obama stands for re-election next November, there will be approximately as many soldiers in Afghanistan as there were when he was inaugurated in January, 2009, which is to say that time will have stood still for nearly four years. Talk about quagmires. Unless the military commanders are wrong and it turns out that the strategy they intend to employ can be managed with fewer troops, then only two things will have changed in Afghanistan during an entire presidential term: a great many American service men and women will have died; and so will have Osama bin Laden.

What is most ironic about Obama’s half-assed withdrawal, in our estimation, is that the second of these developments, the death of bin Laden, actually gave the President the opportunity to make the argument that the war’s objectives in Central Asia have been achieved and that it is therefore time to end the struggle and move on. But in order to do that, Obama would have had to do something truly difficult, namely define victory, which is something that neither he nor his predecessor in the Oval Office has had the stomach to do. So he opted instead just to, well, pussy-foot around for a while, at least until he can be re-elected. This is not only dangerous, irresponsible, and destructive, but likely sets the United States and, indeed, the free world up for greater future tragedy.

As you may know, we here at The Political Forum do not believe that the civilized world’s war against Islamist radicalism is over. We believe, rather, that it has entered a new stage. In order to win that new stage – or, at the very least not to lose it – the Western world, i.e. the United States, will have to be prepared for it and prepared to fight in it. And creeping out of Afghanistan allows for neither.

As we mentioned in passing last week, Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s second-in-command, has been officially named the new emir of al Qaeda, which is to say that he now leads the most prominent, if not the most potent Islamist terrorist organization on the planet. In our estimation, one of two scenarios is most likely for Zawahiri and al Qaeda under his direction.

First, Zawahiri, though Egyptian, understands that the Hindu Kush is the most hospitable region for the advancement of the type of radical, ascetic Islamism that he and bin Laden have always preached. Likewise, he knows that the networks, alliances, and connections that al Qaeda has built in the region are too valuable simply to abandon. But unlike his predecessor, Zawahiri holds no emotional attachment to Afghanistan and actually understands that Pakistan is the real jewel of the region and perhaps of the Islamic world.

Pakistan is, of course, heir to the legacy of the British Commonwealth and, as such, provides connections throughout the Western world that no other Islamic nation could even fathom (Turkey, perhaps, excepted). An Islamist Pakistan would be an exceptionally enticing prospect for this reason alone. Add to that a working alliance with China, the world's rising super power, and, perhaps most important of all, nuclear weapons, and Pakistan seems almost irresistible to the likes of Zawahiri.

Moreover, Pakistan, obviously, has a solid Islamist foundation. It is home to the world's most teeming madrassas. And at this point, its civilian and military leaders are rather aggressively challenging American authority in the region. We know that Zawahiri has always thought of Pakistan as the real prize of the region. It is, in our estimation, highly possible that he will strike while the proverbial iron is hot and focus his organization's efforts less in regaining lost ground in the barren wasteland next door and more in gaining a stronger foothold in Pakistan.

On the other hand, Zawahiri is Egyptian, and he has always believed that his birthright is to lead the Islamization of his homeland. Afghanistan, of course, is useless. It is a corrupt and barren land, best left to the Taliban, to the Pashtun warlords, or whomever else wants it. And though Pakistan is a prize, there can be no bigger prize than the largest Arab nation on earth and the home of the oldest and most respected educational institutions in Sunni Islam.

And though Egypt has traditionally been hostile to al Qaeda's Wahabbi-derived ascetism, the rise of the Salafist gangs in post-Mubarak Egypt suggests that the country has changed, perhaps enough to consent to the presence of al Qaeda in its midst. And speaking of the Salafists, the so-called Arab Spring provides the perfect opportunity for the Islamists to form an alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood (of which Zawahiri was once a member) and the Salafist remnants of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (of which Zawahiri was also a member) and, in doing so, to seize control of the governing institutions of the country.

As we have noted previously in these pages, the so-called Arab Spring is many things, but an unalloyed good is not one of them. Indeed, the likelihood that this eruption of revolutionary fervor will result in anarchy and Islamist violence is, in our opinion, several orders of magnitude higher than the prospect for the emergence of a peaceful democracy. Whether or not al Qaeda and its new emir find a home in this anarchy remains to be seen. But given the high probability of sustained violence against Israel, we think it is quite possible.

And actually, if you're looking for clues as to which course Zawahiri may choose, you should pay close attention to the violence being perpetrated against Israel. If this increases dramatically over the course of the next 12-to-18 months, then you might suspect that Zawahiri and al Qaeda are making a push to be part of a broader Arab Islamist Middle East.

If, by contrast, the level of violence against India increases dramatically, then you might begin to suspect that Zawahiri is staying put, and that he believes that the best way to ensure al Qaeda's future is to incite Islamist fervor in Pakistan, which is to say to incite violence against India, which has always been the Pakistani Islamists' weapon of choice in inciting and exciting their own people.

It is important to note that in either case, Obama's Afghanistan drawdown decision is likely to make it more difficult for the American military to react properly. That is, if the balance of Islamist action shifts to the greater Arab Middle East, Obama will be in the process of reducing the American footprint in Iraq while nonetheless maintaining a sizable presence in Central Asia. If, however, the action re-erupts in Central Asia, this time focusing on Pakistan, Obama will have removed tens of thousands of American troops from the area, will have given back at least some of the gains achieved through the Afghan surge, and will be in no position whatsoever to reverse course, yet again.

We don't necessarily think that "war without end" is the answer in Afghanistan. Or in Iraq. Or anywhere else for that matter. Indeed, we think that Obama

could, at least in theory, make a case for bringing ALL of the troops home from Afghanistan tomorrow. But that would be difficult. And Barack Obama isn't very good at difficult. Especially if it might compromise his election plans.

Of course, if he did that, the troops would be ready for whatever comes next. And something will come next. For no matter how you define victory in Afghanistan or Iraq or anywhere else, Islamist fundamentalism has not yet been defeated and, in some ways, is on the ascendancy. And until that calculus is altered, American national security policy will have to be ready for any contingency.

All in or all out. Wasn't that the "lesson of Vietnam?" We wish.

## THE RETURN OF THE LIBERAL COCOON?

The comedian Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central's much-celebrated pseudo-news program "The Daily Show" and one of the self-proclaimed leaders of the "restore sanity" movement, is ticked off. He's ticked off because the people who watch Fox News are dumb, "misinformed," if you will. Stewart thinks that the world in is horrible shape these days because of the dumb, ideologically driven partisans who run and appear on Fox News and the even dumber and more ideologically driven partisan imbeciles who watch Fox News.

The rest of the media folks, by contrast, are not ideological, at least as Stewart tells it. They're sensationalistic and lazy, sure. But not ideological. CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, MSNBC? No bias. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*? No bias. Moreover, their readers and viewers are not stupid. And neither are his viewers. After all, they are *his* viewers. But the Fox News crowd is just dumb. And that makes Stewart mad. Dumb, dumb, dumb! Mad, mad, mad! Or as Stewart himself put it, in what can only be described as a genuine veins-in-the-neck-bulging-out, angry rant during a recent interview with Fox News' Chris Wallace:

The embarrassment is that I am given credibility in this world because of the disappointment that the public has in what the news media tells them . . .

In the polls who is the most consistently misinformed media viewers?

Fox, Fox viewers . . . Consistently . . . Every poll.

The only problem with this stunning "fact" – which is the lynchpin of Stewart's argument and, indeed, of his entire worldview – is that it's just flat wrong. As it turns out, "every poll" does *not* show that Fox viewers are the most consistently misinformed media viewers. In fact, compared with other television news consumers, Fox viewers are pretty well informed, better informed, in many cases, than viewers of other networks and other programs, including Stewart's own. Politifact, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning fact-checking project of the *St. Petersburg Times*, provides the grizzly details:

We found two polling organizations that have produced periodic "knowledge" surveys differentiated by the respondent's frequent news sources. One is the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, and the other is worldpublicopinion.org, a project managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland.

[In February 2007] 35 percent of Fox viewers earned a high knowledge rating, which was tied with local television news and was one point ahead of the network morning shows.

However, Fox's 35 percent score places it exactly at the national average . . .

[In April 2008] Fox News was just about at the national average – 19 percent

of Fox viewers scored in the high knowledge category, compared to 18 percent of all respondents – but this time a handful of news outlets scored lower than Fox did. With scores ranging from 17 percent all the way down to 9 percent, they were CNBC, local television news, network news, morning news shows, television newsmagazines, personality magazines, religious radio, the Weather Channel, CBS News, *Access Hollywood* and similar shows, and in last place, the *National Enquirer* . . .

Particular Fox shows scored well above the average. *Hannity & Colmes* was one of only four choices to exceed 40 percent – the others were the *New Yorker/the Atlantic*, NPR and MSNBC's *Hardball* – while *The O'Reilly Factor* scored 28 percent, or 10 points above the national average. (*Hannity & Colmes* even exceeded Stewart's *Daily Show* in this poll, 42 percent to 30 percent.) . . .

[In June 2010] Fox News as a whole ranked fairly low among regularly used media outlets – 20 percent answered all four correctly and 18 percent answered three correctly. Still, those numbers beat the national average of 14 percent and 20 percent, respectively. (The best-scoring outlet, the *Wall Street Journal*, posted scores of 51 percent and 23 percent, respectively.)

Fox actually scored better than its two direct cable-news rivals – MSNBC, which is a liberal counterpoint to Fox, and CNN, which is considered more middle-of-the-road. Also scoring lower than Fox were local television news, the evening network news shows and the network morning shows.

And for the third time, particular Fox shows scored well. *Hannity* ranked fifth (just ahead of MSNBC's liberal shows hosted by Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow) and O'Reilly ranked ninth. For the first time, Pew included Glenn Beck in its rankings, and the Fox host finished 12th – slightly ahead of Stewart's own *Daily Show*.

Ummmm . . . ouch? That's gotta kinda sting, no?

Why do we care, you ask? Is it because we have some beef with Stewart and are eager to see him embarrassed? Is it because we want desperately to believe that Fox is better than its detractors say it is? Do we just want for the ranting, sneering anti-democratic elitists of the American left to be proven wrong about their own intellectual superiority? Well . . . no, not really. Sure, those are all nice too. But they're side shows, not the main event.

The real reason we care about this is because Jon Stewart is, in our estimation, a practical, intelligent, levelheaded, judicious, and well informed member of this nation's left-leaning political-entertainment class and, as such, is one of the more reasoned, lucid, and in-touch shapers of elite social and political opinion. And he doesn't have the foggiest flipping idea what he's talking about.

Jon Stewart is absolutely certain that Fox News is biased, but that the *New York Times* is not. He's also absolutely certain that it is okay for him to be biased, because he is "just a comedian." And he's sure that Fox News is destructive because not only is it biased, but it's preaching to the dumbest people on earth, and thus perpetuating their stupidity. And he doesn't just think this, he *knows* it. And he knows it because the facts prove it.

Only the facts don't prove it. Any of it. Jon Stewart made it up. Or he read it somewhere and didn't question it. Or . . . well . . . who knows? Whatever the case, Jon Stewart is the one who, in this case is

“misinformed.” And the reason he is misinformed is because he doesn’t bother to read or watch or listen to the information that proves him wrong. He doesn’t question the trustworthiness of the sources from which he gets his “facts.” He doesn’t crosscheck multiple opinions from multiple perspectives. He doesn’t need to do any of this, you see, because he’s Jon Stewart. And he’s smart. And he reads the *Times*, and it’s not biased, dammit! So why would he need to bother with anything else? Especially, Fox News.

In this, Jon Stewart is the classic modern American liberal, which is to say that he’s exceptionally illiberal. He knows what he knows and there’s not a damn thing anyone can say to convince him otherwise. He is also, unfortunately for modern American liberals, classically representative of the broader fraternity of opinion-shapers on the left, which is to say that his problem is their problem, and it is an enormous problem indeed.

There is a term for what Stewart has done – *is doing* – here, and it’s called “cocooning.” We first used and defined this word in a September 27, 2004 piece, in which we noted that that:

“cocooning,” [is] a term that has been popularized . . . by the liberal blogger Mickey Kaus and which involves Democratic partisans (leaders, operatives, journalists, bloggers, etc.) lulling themselves into a false sense of security . . . by reading and accepting only information that confirms their expectations.

This is precisely what Jon Stewart has done. And, since Stewart is, in many ways, a stand-in for the broader liberal political-entertainment complex, it is our sense that this is precisely what the political and opinion leaders of the left in this country are all doing. Again.

We say “again,” because, obviously, this isn’t the first time that the political left has crawled deeply into its own little cocoon, hidden far away from reality, only to be gobsmacked when that reality eventually became unavoidable.

As you might have guessed by the date associated with the above-cited piece, the last time that the left cocooned so conspicuously was during the run-up to the 2004 presidential election. It may seem silly looking back on it now, but most prognosticators and pundits actually thought, for most of that year, that John Kerry was going to beat the incumbent George W. Bush. Pollster John Zogby called it Kerry’s race to lose, while elections forecaster extraordinaire Charlie Cooke agreed that Kerry most definitely had the upper hand. Democrats were giddy that they had countered the “national security gap” by selecting a decorated combat veteran, and the media too thought that the gaffe-prone “war president” Bush was doomed.

We, by contrast, believed all along that Bush would be re-elected. In fact, we predicted the breakdown of the Electoral College almost precisely, missing on only Hawaii. When asked after the election how the mainstream folks could possibly have been so wrong, while we – who have consistently proclaimed our inability to understand or to “read” the American electorate – could have been so right, our answer was simple: unlike the mainstream folks, we actually have to be informed. We consider it our job to know what is being said, thought, and written – by *everybody* who comments on and analyzes the political scene. Unlike the mainstream media types, we don’t have the luxury of ignoring those with whom we disagree. And even if we did, we couldn’t avoid them, *because they’re the mainstream folks*. They are ubiquitous.

The left-leaning pollsters, analysts, and prognosticators were exposed principally to people who thought about Bush, about Iraq, about the country, and about the election precisely as they did. And it never occurred to them that there could possibly be people out in the hinterlands, so to speak -- where a majority of the electorate, in fact, lives -- that would think about all of those things differently than they did. And since they never thought about it, they never read about it; they never analyzed it; and they never factored it into their calculations. In short, then, the mainstream types cocooned, and we didn’t. We *couldn’t*.

The other time that we recall the left cocooning so obviously was during the entirety of the Clinton presidency. A great many of our friends, colleagues, and fellow political commentators – those who voted for Clinton and whose preferences tended toward liberalism – simply refused to acknowledge that Bill and the members of his administration were downright sleazy, on multiple counts and in multiple ways. When, on occasion, the sleaze became so overwhelming that it couldn't be ignored, some would finally admit that something was rotten, but these acknowledgements were invariably accompanied by the claim that "he is no worse than any of his predecessors." "They all do it," they said. In fact, some argued that Bill's transgressions were arguably less serious than those of the dastardly Reagan.

Any honest review of the Clinton years reveals that this simply was not true. But it was believed to be true by Clinton supporters because they refused to consider the alternative. They closed their eyes. They didn't know the details of the various scandals. They didn't know the intricacies. They didn't know the players. And they didn't have any intention of finding out. It was all "right-wing garbage" anyway, so why should they bother to read the smears?

As it turns out, with Clinton, the cocooners emerged from the chrysalis no worse for the wear, at least in the immediate sense, surviving impeachment and finishing out the presidency more or less successfully. One can argue about the damage done to the party, to various constituencies within the liberal coalition, and to society as a whole through the coarsening of its political discourse and the lowering of the bar of acceptable behavior; at least for liberal politicians. But ultimately Clinton survived the cocooning.

The same, obviously, cannot be said of Kerry, who reportedly was shocked, on election night, to learn that he was "losing to this idiot." If he had been better prepared; if he had known better what to expect; if he had had a better sense of the electorate and what it wanted from its leaders, he wouldn't have been so surprised. But he was the Jon Stewart of his day. He

didn't know that there is another world out there, a world of real people, with real problems, with real love for the nation's Judeo-Christian culture, its traditional mores, morals, social graces, and constitutional democracy. And he didn't care to know any of it, because people like that are nutty or stupid or both. As they are today.

The question then is whether anyone in Barack Obama's inner circle has the good sense and the humility that was lacking in the Kerry campaign, among Clinton's supporters, and is clearly lacking in Jon Stewart. Is anyone in the Obama crowd able to see that the opposition has valid criticisms that are supported by a majority of voters, based on the real consequences of the policies that this White House has foisted on America? Or is the entire kit and caboodle of them capable of dismissing these reproaches as the irrational rantings of mere stupid, confused, and partisan hacks?

If past is prologue, we'd have to guess that the latter is the case. The Tea Party, for virtually the entirety of its existence, has been dismissed as crazy, racist, and unscrupulous. Conservative and Tea Party-supported candidates have likewise been dismissed as crazy, racist, and unscrupulous. And the issues that motivated voters to reject the Obama agenda – in Virginia and New Jersey in November, 2009; in Massachusetts in January 2010; and throughout the country in last November's midterm elections – have been dismissed as frivolous, fleeting, or manipulated by demagogues within the conservative media (Fox News again, or the dastardly Rush Limbaugh).

All things considered, then, we hardly think that there is much chance that either the political-entertainment complex or the Obama administration it serves is likely to concede, over the next 16 months or so, that there are legitimate reasons for the electorate to be unhappy, or more specifically, unhappy with Barack Obama. They can be unhappy with George Bush, if they like. That still seems fair to them. But Obama? That's just nutty. And dumb. Or "misinformed," if you prefer.

Politically, this is good news for conservatives. But the one thing that Jon Stewart was right about during his interview with Chris Wallace is that it is not a good thing when a large segment of the American population is ignorant, or misinformed, if you will. And there is little question that that is the case today. Our advice, then, to Jon the comedian is “physician heal thyself.”

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