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THEY SAID IT

I always enjoy the bit in *Planet of the Apes* where a loinclothed Charlton Heston falls to his knees as he comes face to face with a shattered Statue of Liberty poking out of the sand and realizes that the eponymous simian planet is, in fact, his own — or was. Also the bit in *Independence Day* where Lady Liberty gets zapped by space aliens. And in *Cloverfield* when she's decapitated by a giant monster. And in *The Day After Tomorrow* when she's flash-frozen after polar-ice-cap melting brought on by a speech from Dick Cheney....

But the United States Postal Service has now gone the Hollywood apocalyptic one better and produced a somewhat subtler image of civilizational ruin. The other day the post office apologized for its new stamp honoring Lady Liberty. Due to an unfortunate error, the stamp shows not the 19th-century Statue of Liberty that stands in New York Harbor but the 1990s replica that stands at the New York–New York Casino in Las Vegas. An ersatz statue of pseudo-liberty standing guard over the world's biggest gambling operation: What better way to round out a week in which the Republicans pretended to pass the most historically historic budget cut in history while the president pretended to come up with a plan to address the debt?...

After the revelations that the \$38.5 billion 2011 budget cut will in reality either cut a mere \$352 million from the 2011 budget or, in fact, increase it by \$3 billion, it might be easier just to build a replica White House, Capitol, and Congressional Budget Office at the new Beltway Casino next to Caesar's Palace. Vegas is no longer the world's biggest gambling resort; America is. Barack Obama says we need to "win the future," and one more roll of the dice should do it: a trillion dollars of chips on the stimulus came up empty but let's pile another couple trillion on Obamacare, and "high-speed rail," and "green jobs," and "broadband access" . . . And all the while Wayne Newton is singing "Danke Schoen" in Chinese. But don't worry, we're not just throwing our money away. We're playing to a system! The president calls it "investing in the future." How do you "invest in the future"? By borrowing \$188 million every hour.

Mark Steyn, "Losing the Future," *National Review Online*, April 16, 2011.

THE DEBT-CEILING DRAMA: TWO THUMBS DOWN.

Unless you have been living in a cave for the last couple of weeks or so, you know that the high drama in Washington this week is the panic over the debt-ceiling, which absolutely, positively must, must, must be

In this Issue

The Debt-Ceiling Drama: Two Thumbs Down.

Liberals, Gay Marriage, and Freedom.

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increased immediately, if not sooner, lest the world explode! Or worse! Barack Obama, who wants you to know that he – and only he – is behaving rationally and sensibly while all others around him are acting like spoiled children, has recently joined the discussions, after months of leaving this most important job ever in the whole wide world to ol' whatshisname, the guy with the fake hair and the fake teeth who used to be best known for plagiarizing Neil Kinnock.

In any case, Barack the Calm is involved now, which means that a debt-limit deal will get done. Or it won't. And either way, who cares? This is all about the drama. Nothing more. As the poet put it, that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. And the best drama queens in the world – our alleged “public servants” – are filling their roles nicely, squabbling pettily, bickering openly, posing like Sara Bernhardt on the ice flow, pleasing their respective bases cravenly, all the while intending to do nothing of long-term consequence.

The perennial presidential aspirant and erstwhile Libertarian Ron Paul has his faults, some of which we've documented in these pages, but he knows Washington well, and he has a very good fix on such matters as budget negotiations and the nature of the Republican establishment. So it should be noted that he, unlike many talking heads, actually expects that the President and Congressional Republicans will reach a debt deal. That's the good news. The bad news is that he expects it to be a sellout of the fiscal conservatism for which the reborn GOP House majority purports to stand. It will include “fake” spending cuts, he warns, that will not only not reduce federal expenditures in any significant manner, but will actually increase the burden on Americans in that this tomfoolery will constitute the playing of the Republicans' proverbial trump card, leaving the GOP with no leverage and no opportunity to make any real changes before the next election and before the Bush tax rates expire at the end of 2012.

Paul knows – as we do – that while these budget negotiations address spending in terms of ten year projections, real spending takes place in the here

and now and is re-negotiated every year with a new budget agreement, which is to say that any “projected” spending cuts are fictitious until they are actually made. And since none of the significant cuts under discussion are scheduled to be enforced until after the next election, they will almost certainly remain purely fictitious; they will be negotiated, re-negotiated, re-budgeted, and re-funded long before any actual cutting ever takes place. “Out year” discretionary spending cuts are no more real, you see, than the aforementioned hair on Joe Biden's head.

Douglas Holtz-Eakin, a onetime economics professor at both Princeton and Columbia and the former Director of the Congressional Budget Office, notes that any real and any serious effort to restrain spending will contain “actual cuts in fiscal 2012 discretionary spending,” which is to say that it will contain the actual, verifiable, bona fide spending reductions that take place *before* the next budget is negotiated and *before* the next election. Anything less than that is the same old budget trickery and nothing more. Additionally, Holtz-Eakin suggests, a real spending cut will include “strong enforcement of medium-term caps on discretionary spending, and real changes to the entitlement programs that lie at the heart of the debt explosion.” Again, anything less and our “leaders” are merely play-acting.

Sadly, this is precisely what we expect, play-acting. Of course, there will be a great deal of said play-acting, complete with over-the-top huffing, puffing, screeching, and wailing. But in the end it won't matter much. And why won't it matter? Because it doesn't have to. Yet.

Some of our competitors and even the aforementioned Congressman Paul are expecting a crisis to put an end to this debt-limit business. As they see it, both sides will dig in their heels and the artificial deadline for a negotiated settlement will pass. The fiscal consequences of this failure, i.e. “default,” will become apparent, and everyone will rush back to the table and hammer out something civil and acceptable to all parties except the likes of Ron Paul and Douglas Holtz-Eakin.

But, when considering this, it is important to keep in mind that the debt limit is not the real problem here. The problem is the debt. The problem is the spending. The problem is the massive and unaffordable government that simply cannot continue at its current size. The problem is that neither party is disposed to do much about this situation. In a piece this spring, entitled “Two Sides of the Same Inadequate Coin,” we were clear about how we expected the GOP to handle its newfound power, i.e. much the same as it did before:

Longtime readers know that we are almost as skeptical of Republicans in Washington as we are of Democrats in Washington. We think that they tend to prove Lord Acton’s insight better than almost any creature on earth. Newt the backbencher, for example, was great. Newt the Speaker? Meh . . . not so much.

This, sadly, was just a follow-up to our Fearless Forecast piece in which we predicted the following:

Over the next several months, the Republicans – particularly those in the House, but a handful in the Senate – will make things more difficult for the spendthrift establishment types in Washington. They’ll protest the President’s budget. They’ll raise a stink about increasing the debt limit. They’ll make it hard to pass last year’s appropriations bills when the current continuing resolution expires. In short, they will put up a good fight, make strong, persuasive, and important arguments.

And in the end, we believe, they will capitulate.

Generally speaking, governments do not make significant budget reforms until they are forced to, which is to say that the U.S. government will not truly pare

back its spending unless or until our old friend Ed Yardeni’s bond vigilantes make it do so.

And there, we think, is the crux of the matter. Washington is not set up to relinquish power. Power from Washington must be taken by a greater force, of which there are very few. Mother Nature, the cold, hard light of reality, and Iranian Mullahs are the only ones that readily come to mind. Ergo, Washington will not relinquish its control over the nation’s budgetary affairs until something of apocalyptic proportions occurs.

The Republicans can yammer all they want about how they are the party of fiscal responsibility, but we all know how that turned out last time – and no, we are NOT talking about the last time the Republicans were in the majority. We’re talking about this past April when the GOP put its collective foot down and insisted on significant spending cuts before it would pass last year’s appropriations bills. And in return it got spending cuts that were sold as massive and historic and turned out to be almost negligible, if non-existent (see the “They Said It” section above). If anyone has a reason why we should expect anything different this time around, we’d love to hear it. In any case, we remain skeptical.

As for the newly reformed Barack Obama, who again wants us to believe that he is the reasonable centrist in the game, last February, he submitted a budget that was so bloated and so completely out of touch with fiscal reality that the Democratic-controlled Senate rejected it unanimously. After that, House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan proposed a balanced budget that also suggested reforms to Medicare, which prompted Obama to rethink his approach, after which he made a speech. And then . . . well . . . nothing. When the going gets tough, Obama gets to blathering. Endlessly.

In any case, since he made that speech he has done nothing at all, at least until this week, when all of a sudden he charged back into the arena like Cicero attacking the honor of the dissolute and debauched Mark Antony, pledging to right all wrongs and to

heal all fissures. What we are left with then is a fake impasse at which everyone is huddled together having fake negotiations, waiting for a fake crisis, so that they can make fake budget cuts and raise a fake debt limit. All of which is intended to be riveting to the *sans culottes*, whose financial futures depend on this nonsense.

Well, we are not riveted, so to speak. Truth be told, we don't care much at all.

We would love to be proven wrong, of course. We would love for the Republicans to make actual proposals for actual spending cuts and then refuse to budge until those cuts are enacted. But based on history – recent, distant, and ongoing – we won't hold our breath.

We would suggest that you don't either. Better to prepare for the real crisis that will someday settle this mess.

LIBERALS, GAY MARRIAGE, AND FREEDOM.

We here at The Political Forum have always viewed the notion that “cultural” beliefs can be separated from “economic” beliefs as mindless twaddle advanced by those who are too unserious to think about such matters earnestly or too craven to address them honestly. We have long argued that culture and economics are more than intimately related and are, indeed, part and parcel of one another. In Western and specifically American culture, adherence to and true belief in traditional, Judeo-Christian cultural values implies an understanding that each individual is of infinite value as an object and end of God's love. We further believe that this premise is the basis for John Locke's contention that not only does each man “own” himself, but that he also owns the fruits of his labor, his “property,” so to speak, and that this is foundation upon which American democracy stands. Conversely, adherence to what can generally be called a post-modern value-system dehumanizes the individual by subordinating his or her natural rights to the demands of centralized economic decision making.

Given this, it is, we'll concede, somewhat incongruous that we have only rarely and tangentially addressed and never much cared about the subject of gay marriage, which has once again become the focal point in the culture wars in the aftermath of New York State's passage of a law legalizing same-sex unions. There are reasons for both this incongruity and for our indifference to the issue in general.

For starters, while we believe quite fervently that many of today's social problems are related to the breakdown of the traditional family and worry that further attacks on the institution of marriage will serve only to exacerbate those problems, we think that the role of same-sex marriage in this societal catastrophe is negligible and has been exaggerated by those with secondary agendas.

We believe that the way to address the problems with marriage, the family, children, teens, and societal breakdown is to start with the more obvious and more prevalent disaster that is heterosexual marriage. You want to look at a New York law that signals the end of marriage as we know it and explains the death of the family as it once existed? Forget about the gay marriage law and look rather at the fact that last year New York became the final state in the union to permit no-fault divorce. This, obviously, makes sense in society as it exists today. But it also dramatically illustrates the fact that marriage and family are no longer considered lifetime commitments in these here United States. And the responsibility for this lies with heterosexuals, not homosexuals.

Second, and more to the point, as we've said before, marriage is largely beyond the purview of government anyway. It is a religious institution. And while we agree that the state generally has an interest in encouraging the formation and preservation of stable families, it strikes us that unleashing the power of the state to promote specific behavior is best done sparingly. And in the post-modern, post-14th Amendment world, it is unlikely that the state will be able to maintain its ability to dispense limited sanction on unions for long, with or without legislative approval. If we wish to keep the state out

of the business of encouraging lifestyles of which we disapprove, whatever they may be, then we will have to acknowledge that perhaps the state should not be encouraging any lifestyles at all.

Now, all of that notwithstanding, we think that the gay marriage debate – and the passage of a gay marriage law in New York in particular – represents a watershed in American politics and, quite possibly, represents a significant fork on the road to the ultimate and final collapse of American liberalism. As a rule, the left and its media allies accuse the right of using the debate over gay marriage cynically, playing upon anti-gay sentiments. And while there may be some truth to this, it is more so the case, in our estimation, that the left itself uses the gay marriage debate cynically, exploiting the issue in an attempt to burnish its reputation for fostering freedom while nevertheless restricting true liberty in almost every other way and at almost every opportunity.

Let us explain.

Once upon a time, American liberalism was different from what it is today, radically different. We have neither the time nor the space to get into the entire story right now. For our purposes, it should suffice to say liberalism as it emerged in the late 19th century was far more enlightened and far more dedicated to the protection and encouragement of liberty and free enterprise than is today's version. Today's version is tired and regressive; it is reactionary in every sense of the word. It is oppressive and stifling. It is restrictive, inhibitory, and destroys the creative impulse. It nearly universally abhors originality, rewards conformity, and infantilizes those it purports to aid.

For an explanation of this we will turn to the following synopsis from the academic historian Walter Russell Meade. We don't agree entirely with his assessment and would likely not be as generous to many of the patriarchs of 20th century liberalism as he would. But in the interest of brevity and lucidity, we think the following synopsis provides a reasonable outline of the early development of what we know as liberalism in this country. (Please note as you read it, that this is part of a longer essay on the stages of

liberalism and Meade's labeling of the 20th century version as "4.0" is merely to distinguish it from three previous pre-Civil War stages in its development.)

In the 20th century, liberals continued to seek new ways of advancing the core liberal synthesis of individual freedom with social order in the post-Civil War world. Ultimately they produced liberalism 4.0, the model that most Americans today understand when they hear the word liberal. Today 4.0 is increasingly outdated and backward-looking, but in its time it was a genuinely positive attempt to realize old values in new circumstances, and many of its achievements still demand our respect . . .

The industrial revolution and associated phenomena (urbanization, mass immigration from non-English speaking, non-Protestant societies, the economic decline of small farmers and rural communities) presented liberals with new and very complicated problems. The problems of urbanization, class conflict (and the competition with socialism for the support of urban industrial workers), assimilation, and the regulation of a modern industrial economy gave 4.0 liberals new issues to worry about.

Their problems were extremely complex and posed some challenging questions about the basic premises of liberal thought. Classically, liberals considered an unholy alliance of church and state as the prime enemy of freedom. In the late nineteenth century, the rise of huge industrial corporations created yet another force that threatened to crush individual liberty; 4.0 liberals began to think about the state as a possible ally to defend individuals from unaccountable private power.

The progressives and liberals who created liberalism 4.0 did their best to address these and similar problems in ways that they hoped would preserve as much as possible of the old liberal heritage in a new and more difficult world. The development of a professional, bureaucratic civil service and the regulatory state were intended to preserve individual autonomy and dignity in a world dominated by large and predatory corporate interests – and split into classes with most industrial and agricultural workers subject to very low wages, long hours and poor working conditions. At the same time the challenges of modernization and urbanization (public health, food safety, provision of newly necessary services like electricity and gas) could best be met through public services and, in some cases, heavily regulated private monopolies. The professional and managerial classes were not just middle classes in the sense of standing between the rich and the poor in income and status; they were mediating classes who sought through the state, the universities and the learned professions to impose a balance between the interests of the wealthy and the workers.

When it came to both gender and (perhaps their greatest accomplishment) race, 4.0 liberals did yeoman service to the cause of human freedom by opening the doors of full participation more widely than ever before

Although socialists and social democrats sometimes made common cause with 4.0 liberals, it's important to realize that, at bottom, 4.0 liberalism was built as an alternative to socialism rather than as an introduction to it. That is, many American liberals came to believe that

providing benefits like Social Security and unemployment insurance would inoculate American workers against more virulent forms of socialist ideology, and attract the new immigrants and their children toward the American liberal tradition.

It worked. The strong socialist political movements, mostly based among recent immigrants from countries with strong socialist and social-democratic traditions, gradually faded away. The descendants of the European immigrant waves between 1880 and 1920 turned their backs on socialism; and the overwhelming bulk of the American labor movement was strongly anti-communist all through the Cold War.

Much of this can be said as well about the general movement towards the administrative state. We may recall Woodrow Wilson best as the slightly nutty, proto-liberal president who wanted to “make the world safe for democracy.” But before trudging off to Washington, Wilson was President of Princeton and was also likely the most prominent political scientist in the nation. As an academic, Wilson's influence was tremendous, and he is considered the undisputed father of American public administration and, as such, the father of the *professional* American civil service as well. And while his progeny may seem like Frankenstein's monster to us today, it was anything but at the time.

When Wilson unleashed his offspring upon the land, they were a godsend to a largely rural and uneducated population that was dealing with a rapidly evolving, technologically advancing, and swiftly urbanizing society and a political establishment that was manifestly corrupt. The professional bureaucratic class brought stability, transparency, and guidance, and helped restore confidence in democratic governance.

Additionally, as we have noted countless times before and as the great Max Weber demonstrated explicitly, the bureaucratic structure applied to professional

government administration was (and in many ways still is) the most effective and efficient means for handling, distributing, and maintaining technical information in a large, diverse, and technologically complicated organization.

Of course, the problem with all of this is that that was then . . . and this is now. The conditions that spawned “liberalism 4.0,” as Meade terms it, no longer exist. The erstwhile uneducated and rural population is now highly educated and predominantly urban or suburban. Corporations are hardly the exploitive monstrosities that workers once feared. And market forces have proven more effective than government at compelling virtuous corporate behavior. Labor and capital generally work together today toward common goals; immigration problems have less to do with inability to integrate than lack of desire to do so; the greatest discrepancies in race and gender treatment have been addressed and rectified; and so it goes. Perhaps most notably of all, as we have noted countless times in these pages, Woodrow Wilson’s answer to corruption has itself been corrupted, becoming part of the problem with rather than a solution to the state of democratic governance. All of which is to say, as Meade concedes, that the liberalism of Wilson, the Roosevelts, Kennedy, Johnson and the rest has outlived its purposes.

Of course, today’s liberals will not concede this point. To today’s liberals, it is always 1932. The country is always on the verge of collapse and always threatened by nefarious forces: nasty corporations; evil Wall Street bankers; racist Bull Connor type Southern politicians looking to deny black men and women their civil rights. Additionally, the people are always and everywhere ignorant, dim-witted, and desperately in need of government agents who can and will speak to them very slowly, with very short words, and in very short sentences, so as to make otherwise complex subjects easily understood by the cretin masses. And government is always and everywhere the solution to rather than part of the problem.

Ask Barack Obama, for example, why his policies – any of his policies – have failed, and he’ll tell you without hesitation that it is because people are too

stupid to understand them and have therefore fought against them instead of admitting that their “betters” know what is best for them. He doesn’t put it that way, of course. He says that the policies “weren’t explained properly” or some such drivel. But it’s clear what he means.

Now, if you take all of this and couple it with Acton’s dictum, you wind up with a governmental elite that was once necessarily paternal in its dealings with the masses, as it directed them toward greater liberty, but now is superfluous, arrogant, corrupt, ignorant of its own gratuitousness, and yet unwilling to part with even the slightest shred of power; a self-satisfied and sanctimonious mob that is constantly striving to achieve greater and greater power – all in the name of what it has convinced itself is the “common good.” Meade’s phrase “outdated and backward-looking” doesn’t really seem adequate, given the starkness of the situation, though today’s “liberals” certainly fit that description well.

These “liberals” are also, unfortunately, radically illiberal and freedom abhorring. Indeed, if one looks at the liberal agenda now and over the last three decades at least, the most striking feature is its overwhelming hostility to liberty and individual rights. In all phases of human endeavor, from business to transportation; from family life to education and beyond, liberalism has sought to exert greater and greater state control and to allow less and less individual choice and personal freedom. With one notable exception.

As we have noted before, the only aspect of human life that today’s political liberals believe necessitates greater personal freedom and less political and social control is sexuality. That’s it. Period. Nothing else. Look at the great liberal quests for “freedom” over the last several decades: Women’s rights, equality, and freedom are boiled down exclusively to the issue of “choice” with regard to birth control and abortion. Freedom of speech and expression is, by and large, represented as the right to do or say anything one wants with regard to the depiction of sex; “pornography,” as it was once called. The great civil rights battle of the times, of course, is the

right the sleep with and to marry whomever you want whenever or wherever you want. It's all about sex and the commission, depiction, or legitimization of it. And nothing more. As the inimitable Mark Steyn recently put it, "in a world ever more micro-regulated . . . sexual license is one of the few things you don't need a license for."

In this sense, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg is the perfect example of the modern liberal. In Bloomberg's New York, you are not permitted by law to eat what you want, smoke what you want or where you want – *even on private property* – drink what you want, salt your food to taste, and countless other things that free-born men and women once took for granted. And if the Mayor has his way, these infringements on liberty will only continue to grow, as he finds new and improved ways to save poor, stupid New Yorkers – which is to say everyone who isn't him – from themselves.

At the same time, Bloomberg actually had the gall and the lack of self-awareness to respond to the state's gay marriage law by noting that: "Government should not tell you what to do unless there's a compelling public purpose." The Mayor's utter and complete cluelessness and lack of self-awareness would be hilarious were it not so pathetic and, frighteningly, so characteristic. When it comes to seasoning your green beans or choosing what to drink with your hot dog, the government has a "purpose" so compelling that even to question the Mayor is tantamount to mutiny. But when it comes to choosing a life-partner? Meh. "Parody" doesn't seem quite strong enough a word, does it?

Many of today's liberals insist that the Christian churches and the traditions associated with them are obsessed with sex. We'd suggest, in truth, that they have it precisely backward. Liberals are obsessed with sex, in part because it gives them something to latch onto and to use as a smokescreen to hide their otherwise complete revulsion with individual liberty. As long as there is sex and there are sexual proclivities

which liberals can exploit, they can at least simulate a belief in individual freedom. And as long as those proclivities run contrary to the fundamental purpose of sex – i.e. procreation – as all of the left's sexual cravings seem to do (abortion, birth control, gay marriage, pornography, teaching masturbation in schools, etc., etc., ad nauseam), then they represent no real threat to the liberal power structure and serve only to placate those whose conception of freedom is limited by their collective immature imagination and their collective immature libido.

Again, to reiterate the point we made up top, our feelings about gay marriage and its participants generally run to the ambivalent, if sympathetic.

By contrast, our feelings about those who demagogue the issue of gay marriage; those who insist that it somehow represents *real* freedom, specifically so that they may continue to distract the public from the ongoing erosion of the broader societal freedoms, are not so benevolent.

American liberalism is a spent force, an ideology that has long outlived both its purpose and the conditions which necessitated its formation. As you watch the sad, depressing show that is the debt-ceiling dance; as you listen to the President prattle on about the need for more tax "revenues"; as you watch the Democrats dig in their heels and refuse even to think about amending the nation's entitlement programs, recall this and remember another point that we made above, that all of this is inter-related. Republicans, conservatives, and libertarians will push freedom through the budget, through the tax code, and through the regulatory structure. Democrats and liberals will use those same tools to consolidate power. And they will push the semblance of freedom through gay marriage, abortion rights, pornography, and God only knows what else.

And yet they'll insist that the "culture wars" are the fault of the conservatives. Don't believe it.

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