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THEY SAID IT

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries, which result, gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty.

George Washington, Farewell Address, September 17, 1796.

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THE END OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY, TAKE TWO.

The country is, you don't need us to tell you, in a rather precarious spot. Obviously, the economic "recovery" isn't much a recovery. The markets have, for weeks, been signaling extreme discomfort, and even a majority of Democrats are now – for the first time in the Obama presidency – telling pollsters that the nation is "on the wrong track."

The latter is, of course, a truism. When Standard and Poor's issued its downgrade of U.S. sovereign debt the other day, it noted that "The political brinksmanship of recent months highlights what we see as America's governance and policymaking becoming less stable, less effective, and less predictable than what we previously believed," which is to say that it too thinks the government is broken.

Republicans, of course, blame Obama and his fellow Democrats for the mess in which the nation finds itself. The Democrats appear to have decided to focus their finger pointing at the dastardly Tea Party, accusing this loosely knit, largely leaderless organization of "hostage taking" and behaving like "terrorists."

It remains to be seen whom the majority of ordinary Americans will eventually blame. Our guess is that the Democrats will convince some Americans that the Tea Partiers are the bad guys, which translated means that we think the GOP is unlikely to see any great surge in its popularity in the aftermath of the latest round of Washington finger pointing.

At the same time, we think that the attempt by the Democrats to diffuse the nation's surging populist tensions by blaming its sole populist movement is further evidence of just how completely out of touch they are with the mainstream of America.

Perhaps, as Democrats claim, a majority of voters didn't agree with the Tea Party caucus's behavior during the debt-ceiling debate. Who knows? Whatever the case, it seems unlikely to us that the electorate will take its demand that someone hold the Washington establishment's feet to the fire and vent its frustration on the one group in Congress that is holding the Washington establishment's feet to the fire. But maybe we're just watching the wrong news channel.

In the medium term, it is quite possible that this whole mess will have some significant effect on Barack's re-election effort. In truth, how could it not? The nation has been through some tough times and some pretty poor presidents since 1941, but he's the first to preside over an S&P downgrade and the first to react to said downgrade – and everything else that happens during his presidency – like a petulant child. Nothing is ever his fault. Someone else is always to blame. And when bad things happen, he can't help it.

We don't know what this poor damn fool reads or has read, but it seems possible that at some time or another he stumbled upon Truman's famous quote about the buck stopping at his desk, coupled it with the fact that Truman left office with terrible poll numbers, and decided that that wasn't going to happen to him. More likely, he is a victim of what psychologists call arrested development, meaning that while he is an adult age-wise, he has the characteristics of an adolescent.

In any case, it seems likely to us that if the Republicans can simply manage to nominate someone able to walk and chew gum at the same time, Obama will be in serious trouble in 2012. But, beyond that, even if we are wrong and he manages to salvage his own political career, we have come to the conclusion that he will have destroyed his party as it exists today.

Now, if all of this sounds just a little bit familiar, that's because it is. Indeed, throughout the latter half of the 1990s, we – and countless others – made a similar claim that Bill Clinton was in the process of destroying

the same party. Sure, we conceded, he had survived several scandals, including the one that had led to his impeachment. And yes, he had managed, somehow, to maintain the personal affection of the American people, despite his many foibles and failings. But his presidency had been hell for other Democrats, as the numbers clearly demonstrated.

Almost exactly 13 years ago, in a piece entitled “Hey Buddy, Get the Beer Man Over Here,” we ran through some of those numbers, citing, among others, Daniel Casse, who wrote thusly in the magazine *Commentary*:

By any objective measure, the Clinton era has been calamitous for the Democratic party. Since the President took office in January 1993, the party has suffered a series of defeats at virtually every level of government and in every region of the country. At the time Bill Clinton was elected, 30 states had Democratic governors; today, the number is down to eighteen. If, six years ago, nearly 60% of legislators in statehouses across the country were Democrats, now only 52% are. The two largest cities in the U.S., Los Angeles and New York, have elected Republican mayors. And, most notably, in the midterm election of 1994, the Democrats lost control of both houses of Congress for the first time in four decades.

There are other signs of weakness. Since 1992, nearly 400 elected officials nationwide, including five Congressmen and two Senators, have switched party affiliation from Democratic to Republican. Voter allegiance has likewise been affected: two months after Clinton took office, 52% of respondents to a New York Times survey said they most closely identified with the Democratic party; this past May, only 44% of respondents gave the same answer.

Sounded pretty bad. And it was. But it wasn't anywhere nearly as bad, or anywhere nearly as enduring, as most of us thought at the time.

As it turned out, the "destruction" wreaked upon the Democratic Party in the 1990s was, for the most part, coincidental to Clinton. That is, there were other variables at play in the '90s that damaged the political left in this country, and that would have damaged the left no matter who had been president. Among other things, these included the political coming-of-age of the socially conservative South; the concomitant withdrawal from public service of the last of the Democratic old-guard, particularly in the South; the collapse of the command-and-control economies of the Soviet bloc and the attendant reaffirmation of confidence in free markets and capitalism; and the consolidation of the Reagan-Bush economic policies. Clinton-fatigue may have played some role in some races, but, as we now know, it was hardly the harbinger of a permanent partisan realignment.

This is not to say that the Republican victories in the 1990s were not part of a significant shift in political voting patterns. They were. But they were the tail-end of the realignment begun in 1980 or even, perhaps, 1968. It is worth remembering, in this context, that after Johnson announced his decision not to run for re-election in 1968, Republicans won four of the next five presidential elections. And the one they lost was attributable to personal corruption, not a Democratic partisan resurgence.

Ironically, the one Democrat who may have been hurt more than any other by the presumed Clinton-curse was his Vice President, Al Gore, who should, by all rights, have been a shoe-in for the presidency in 2000. After several years of strong economic growth, with a popular departing president, and with no major turmoil roiling the country, he should have cruised to the White House. But his grating personality and Carter-esque moralism seemed tolerable only when he appeared to be squeaky clean, which, it turned out, after eight years as Bill's enabler, bag man, and errand boy, he wasn't.

The phenomenon that we saw throughout the Republican realignment involved the growing independence of one of the three critical components of the Roosevelt coalition that had provided the foundation of the Democratic majority since the Great Depression, i.e., minorities, organized labor, and the ethnic-geographic population mass known alternatively as the Jacksonians or the Scots-Irish. The one that began to wander off the proverbial reservation was the latter, the Scots-Irish. In the '70s, these hearty Americans rebelled against the cultural liberalism of the New Left. In the '80s they became "Reagan Democrats." In the '90s, they returned home to put one of their own, along with his lovely wife Bruno, in the White House, but wandered off again when he grew too liberal.

Now, by all rights, these Jacksonian Democrats could have been expected to return home again at the turn of the century, fleeing the tension surrounding the conflict between the religious-conservative and libertarian factions of the GOP. But they were prevented from doing so by Gore's disastrous campaign, and then by 9/11 and the Democrats' irresolute response to it. They did, however, return in 2006 and stayed in full force in 2008, handing the Speaker's gavel to Nancy Pelosi and the keys to the White House to Barack, thus convincing many political analysts that a new era of Democratic dominance had been born.

Then Obama actually took office. And in the two-and-a-half years of his presidency, he has done everything imaginable to reassert and then to discredit the progressive state. In Obama's estimation, the problem with the previous eight years of governance – if not the 20 years before that as well – was that government didn't *do* enough. It didn't try enough. It didn't deliver on the progressive promise. Government needed, in his estimation, to be more proactive. It needed to play a larger role in the economy, to ensure fairness, to prevent negative failures, and to provide more aggressively for those who were unable to provide for themselves. And that's what he set about doing.

From the great stimulus of 2009 to the health care reform bill to financial reform, everything he has done has expanded the government into the day-to-day lives of average Americans. To compound matters, his interventions have been couched in the most patronizing terms possible. It's not just that he wants to help average Americans. It's that he knows that average Americans are incapable of helping themselves in these trying circumstances and that they need to be helped by those smarter, savvier, or better equipped than they. And if they don't readily accept the help offered by their betters, it's because they don't understand or haven't followed the debate closely enough or simply don't have the specialized knowledge necessary to make necessary judgments.

And despite these massive efforts, expenditures, overhauls of American life, and his nasty condescension and vicious contempt for his fellow Americans, his efforts have been absolute dismal failures. Unemployment continues at above 9%, and economic growth has again slowed to a near crawl in the face of repeated promises of "imminent" recovery. The financial markets are crashing. The deficit and national debt continue to explode. And then, of course, there's the S&P thingy, which the administration said simply could not happen. And as if this weren't enough, it is all but assured that when the health care law is eventually implemented, things will quickly get worse.

Now, when one looks at the Democratic coalition and at those whom Obama specifically promised to help, it becomes clear that those he promised to help most are also the ones who have been devastated most by his policies, and are also the ones least likely to be able to do anything about it. Minorities in particular and big labor as well have been crushed by the ongoing failure of Obamanomics.

The black middle class is disappearing so rapidly and so incontestably that if such an outcome were to occur during the presidency of a white Republican, there can be little doubt that it would almost instantly be said to constitute a "war on black America." Likewise with organized labor, where public-sector unions

are being squeezed by the budget shortfalls in states and municipalities, and private-sector unions find themselves virtually abandoned.

In spite of all of this, minorities and labor – the true liberals – are not about to forsake their savior, regardless of the grumbling you may hear from some precincts on the far left. Obama is their guy. And they will do everything they can for him, despite his not having done much of anything for them. They will be there for him next November. Period.

The same, however, cannot be said of the third leg of the Roosevelt coalition, the aforementioned Jacksonian/Scots-Irish. They abandoned Obama in droves in 2010. And they have stayed away ever since. And they are not coming back.

In and of itself, this should not come as too much of a surprise. Nor should it constitute much of a concern for the broader Democratic Party. Obama has always been rather antipathetic to the generally blue-collar Jacksonians and to their rust-belt, Bible-belt, and Appalachian strongholds. And they, likewise, have never really warmed to him. They rallied to his cause in the 2008 general election in large part because they had no other option and because they – the longtime principal providers of this nation's soldiers – had tired of the tax-cut-and-spend Republicanism and foreign-policy adventurism that had characterized the Bush presidency. Still they were never as dedicated to Obama as they were to the Democratic Party.

The problem for the Democrats is that the Scots-Irish rebellion is not just against Obama, but is against the entire progressive-bureaucratic apparatus. For two-and-a-half years, they have suffered the progressive agenda and have done so for nothing. They have put up with every indignity conceivable. They have sacrificed the liberty of which they are historically fiercely proud, giving 1/6th of the economy over to the government. They have seen the fiscal balance of their country decimated in the pursuit of satiating favored constituencies. They have been called stupid, inattentive, and unable to help themselves. And in return, they have received a big, giant, heaping pile of nothing.

Moreover, in response, the progressives – and here it is *not* just Obama, but virtually the entirety of the Democratic establishment – insist that the failings of their agenda are not the result of too much government, too much infringement on liberty, and too much profligacy *but not enough*. They insist that the answer to all the problems is not to go back and re-examine decisions taken with the hope of determining what might have gone wrong, but to double-down on those decisions in the hope that something might go right.

What the Democrats have yet to realize is that the populist revolt that they are facing right now is not, contrary to their self-comforting media memes, being led by a handful of crazy, right-wing nuts who hate the black guy in the oval office. It is, rather and more relevantly, a revolt of erstwhile Democrat-leaning “independent” blue-collar voters – Scots-Irish in particular – who have tired of seeing their liberty attacked, tired of seeing their children’s futures mortgaged, tired of being insulted by the “credentialed” elites, and tired of seeing nothing in return, of seeing all the bailout dollars go to big banks and all the stimulus checks go to state government unions.

This is not, in our opinion, a temporary separation from the party as it was during the much the 1980s and 1990s. This is not a provisional situation that will resolve itself with the next election cycle. This is, rather, the less educated, lower middle class, blue-collar Scots-Irish reading the signs far better and far more quickly than their erstwhile Democratic brethren. This is the Jacksonians abandoning the progressive model for good.

Given the financial difficulties facing the nation, the ultimate unsustainability of the debt, and the demographic impossibility of the entitlement state, the progressive-administrative republic cannot last, and the Jackson/Scots-Irish have figured this out too, far sooner than their allegedly smarter and more impressively credentialed “betters.”

Additionally, this is not, in our estimation, necessarily a net positive for the old and retrograde Republican establishment. Of course, many of these erstwhile Democrats and independents will become Republicans. But most will not, at least not reflexively. And if the GOP manages to nominate a candidate who is no more dedicated to rolling back the progressive-administrative state or to restoring the proper province of personal liberty (e.g. a micromanaging bureaucrat who passed his own health care “reform”), then these alienated erstwhile Democrats may look elsewhere or may not vote at all. It is important to remember, we think, that these voters got behind Obama just three short years ago, despite their initial misgivings, because they had had enough of a GOP establishment that similarly took their resources, meddled with their liberty, treated them shabbily, and delivered them nothing. If the GOP intends for the Democrats’ loss to be its gain, it most certainly has its work cut out for it.

All things considered, the political upheaval we have witnessed over the last two years, with the Tea Party and its various offshoots, is, we believe, just the beginning. A true and largely volatile realignment is underway and neither party will emerge from it quite the same as it entered. The GOP coalition began to fray in 2006. The Democratic coalition, frayed for three decades, repaired itself in 2008, and is collapsing again. Obama, either oblivious to this or unconcerned, continues to pursue his agenda wholeheartedly. And we, his reluctant charges, are waist-deep in the Big Muddy. And, like Lyndon Johnson before him, the big fool says to push on.

THE LIBYAN QUAGMIRE, REVISTED.

While Barack Obama continues to fret publicly about how his political opponents are undermining the good name of the United States, and while Vice President Biden continues to dissemble about whether or not he called some political opponents “terrorists,” out in the real world, actual terrorists are undermining the good name of the United States and, in the process, killing American soldiers. Indeed, while White

House attention appears to be fixed on the mess in Washington, the rest of the world continues to spin on its axis.

In Afghanistan, SEAL Team 6, the Special Forces unit last seen carrying out the mission to kill Osama bin Laden, has just suffered the worst casualty-episode of the entire war, presumably at the hands of the resurgent enemy. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, the American-backed Tahrir Revolution in Egypt continues on pace – assuming the “pace” in question is a collapse into complete anarchy, followed by the imposition of either a military junta or an Islamist autocracy. Predictably, Iraq continues to grow increasingly violent, and Iran is still building its bomb.

And then there’s Libya, Obama’s forgotten war, or at least the war he would like the American public to forget about. Believe it or not, there’s still a war going on over there, not that you’re likely to hear about it from the leader of the free world, or his friends in the mainstream press. Moreover, the guy we are supposed to be fighting over there, the desert drag queen with the bad perm, is still in power. “Officially,” the anointed one is still not trying to depose him, although unofficially, he seems to be trying to do something of the sort.

But does anyone, anywhere know what that is? And if anyone does, will they share it with the American public, the ones who are paying for this fiasco?

According to David Rieff, writing in *The New Republic*, the answer to the second question is “no,” largely because the answer to the first one is “yes”:

Less than a month before he left office, outgoing Secretary of Defense Robert Gates estimated the U.S. would spend \$750 million on the Libyan operation, while a Department of Defense document published in May revealed the American contribution to Operation Unified Protector involved 75 aircraft (including drones), flying 70 percent of the reconnaissance missions, 75

of refueling missions, and more than one-quarter of all air sorties. And yet, from March 28, when President Obama announced Operation United Protector’s predecessor, Operation Odyssey Dawn, until now, the fog of incoherent justification for the war has been at least as thick of the proverbial fog of war itself.

Have we gone to war? Well, no, not exactly. We were, Obama said in that first speech, “[committing] resources to stop the killings” of innocent Libyan civilians by Colonel Qaddafi’s forces. If the United States has initiated combat operations, this really amounted not to war-fighting, but to taking “all necessary measures to protect the Libyan people” and to “save lives.” And did our actions mean that the goal of the mission was regime change, Iraq- or Afghanistan-style? Not at all, the president insisted. Taking a predictable swipe at the Bush administration, he said dismissively that we had already gone “down that road in Iraq.” It was an apt metaphor, if, perhaps, unconsciously so, since regime change would have required just that: sending troops down the road, on the ground in Libya. And that, the president argued, would be far more dangerous than what he was ordering the military to do.

This may have sounded like the prudent thing, but what it was—what it is, for nothing has changed at all in this regard over the course of the past four months, even though we have officially recognized the Libyan rebels—is the incoherent, internally self-contradictory thing. We believe Qaddafi must go, and we will not let him make significant advances on the ground, but we refuse to take responsibility for his overthrow. So,

to use a military term of art, we have an end state—Qaddafi’s ouster—but we are not willing to do what is needed to attain that goal expeditiously, which, of course, is why there is at least, for the moment, still a stalemate on the ground in Libya.

Oh good. This is bound to end well, dontcha think?

Interestingly, the title of David Rieff’s piece from which the above is drawn is “We Have No Idea What We Are Doing in Libya.” That is certainly true. We – as a country – have no idea whatsoever what we are doing. But that isn’t to say that we are doing nothing. Indeed, we are doing a great deal, most of it unintentional and most of it ultimately destructive. Among other things, we are participating in a long-term civil war, laying waste to an already wasted country via a process that we are not exactly certain is going to help win us the hearts and minds of the bystanders in the civil war.

More to the point, we are also contributing ultimately to the destabilization of an already incredibly unstable country –rich in oil and poor in just about everything else, including civic bonds and institutions. In a recent piece for *The Atlantic*, James Joyner, a former army officer, political science professor, and military strategy journalist, noted the following:

Center for a New American Security fellow Andrew Exum observed at the outset of operations, post-Qaddafi Libya will be an exercise in “starting from scratch.” The former Italian colonial rulers destroyed most pre-existing institutions while studiously avoiding creating new ones. “The Italian governors of Libya systematically undermined the old Ottoman administration, which they viewed as a threat. Qaddafi, incredibly, managed to make things worse. Suspicious of the very idea of the Libyan state, he denied such a state was necessary and undermined any attempt to create functioning bureaucracies.”

A February *Newsweek* feature by Dartmouth-based Libya scholar Dirk Vandewalle declared, “Libya will begin afresh after Gaddafi, in a comprehensive reconstruction of everything civic, political, legal, and moral that makes up a society and its government. But it remains dauntingly unclear where new leadership will come from.” It continued, “Getting Libya back on its feet will be an unwieldy, and probably fractious, process in which many scores are settled against those who once supported the Gaddafi regime. But the problem is, of course, that much like in the former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe, virtually everyone at one point or another had to deal with the regime to survive. Unless political authority can be restored quickly, the sorting out of claims will undoubtedly be a bloody affair in light of the pent-up frustration that is now being released.”

James Dorsey noted for *Al Arabiya* recently, “The immediate problems Libyans and the international community will have to address once Mr. Qaddafi departs are huge and so are the potential pitfalls. The problems include restoring and maintaining law and order; securing basic services such as food, water and energy; achieving international recognition of a post-Qaddafi government; resuming oil exports to ensure funding for the new government; and kick starting Libya’s stagnating economy.”

Joyner continues by noting that the lack of planning on the part of the administration for the all but certain difficult transition to follow has “parallels with Iraq [that] are eerie.” This may be. And certainly we don’t dispute the notion that planning for post-Saddam Iraq was less than ideal, to put it mildly.

But what Joyner doesn't seem to understand is that drawing a parallel to Iraq is pointless because there will be no post-regime occupation in Libya – not by the United States, not by Great Britain, not by France, and not by NATO. No one has the stomach for such an occupation. And heaven knows, no one has the money for it. Once old Maddog Qaddafi has been dispatched – and we presume that he will be, someday – the Libyans will be on their own, and their lack of functioning bureaucracies and other civic institutions will be their own problem.

The parallel that this suggests to us, then, is not Iraq, but Somalia, where al Qaeda is harbored, where jihadis are trained, where pirates control the shipping lanes, and where, as we learned over the last couple of weeks, men, women, and children are starving to death at an alarming rate. Like presumably post-Qaddafi Libya, Somalia has no civic institutions, no functioning bureaucracy, no national government to speak of, and no hope. And this, of course, is why it is home to so many of the region's and the world's most serious problems, and has been for two decades now.

Does this mean that Libya is necessarily doomed to collapse into anarchy like Somalia? Well, no. There are other possibilities. For example, the rebels may take over and may consolidate power, and may compensate for the lack of governing institutions by turning to the one unifying institution that could unite the people of the country, Islam and Sharia law. Or perhaps Egypt, with its historical claim on Libya could choose to invade its neighbor, to pre-empt anarchy, launching a regional war and perhaps eventually involving much of the Arab world.

So . . . at least . . . there are some “optimistic” scenarios for which we can hope.

And this makes it somewhat understandable why President Obama and his British and French counterparts are not too anxious to end this war. It may be long, drawn-out, costly and embarrassing. But that's better than the alternatives. *N'est pas?*

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